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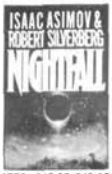

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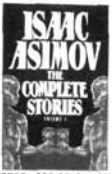

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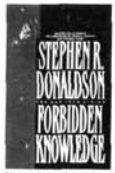

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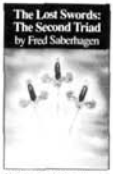

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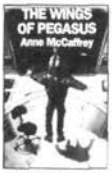

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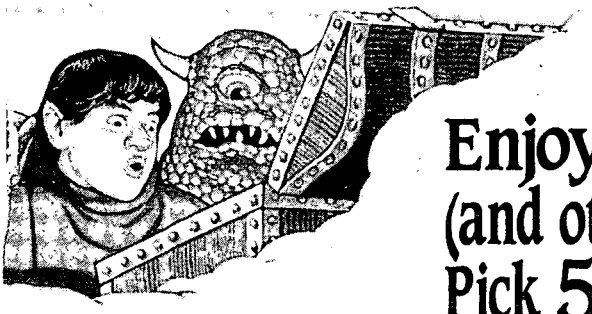

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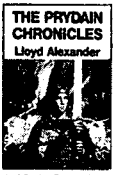

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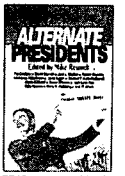

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION® MAGAZINE

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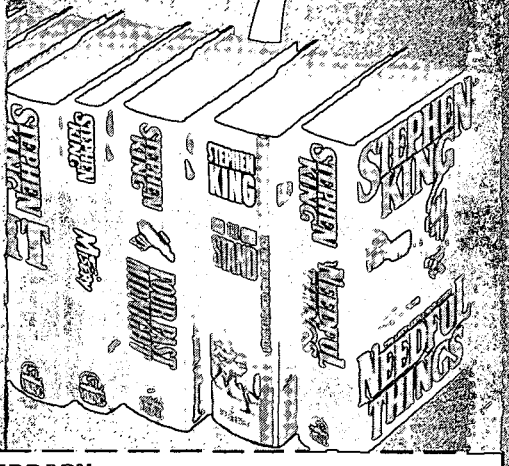

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

THE QUEEN'S ENGLISH

Back in 1971, I was asked to give a talk in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Montgomery County Community College—the oldest of the community colleges in the country. I agreed, for in those days I was still willing to travel a bit and going to Washington, D.C., didn't strike me as something I couldn't do.

The college went all out in their celebration and managed to get an incredible number of people to come. So many people came, in fact, that there was no room for them except in the Washington Cathedral, an enormous place which was, as yet, unfinished.

When it came time for me to make my speech, I was ushered into the high pulpit (a bit frightening for I was way up above the audience) and there I gave my speech.

After I was through, my dear wife, Janet (actually, we were not quite married as yet), said to me, "I have never heard you give a speech that was so perfect." I said, "Nonsense, Janet. It was just a matter of being in the high pulpit and it seemed as though there were a divine afflatus descending upon me."

But then, I eventually got a copy of my talk and I was asked to edit it. I *hate* doing that, for my talks, although they sound very good when I'm giving them, are full of incomplete sentences and other imperfections that I see when I have to look at them straight from the recording device. Imagine my astonishment when my Montgomery talk was the only one I had ever given in which there were no imperfections. Everything went smoothly and I did not have to make any corrections. The divine afflatus had indeed descended upon me.

We will now move up a few years. I was having dinner with a bunch of friends, one of whom is an Episcopal minister. He is an awfully nice person, who I am very fond of, but he does have this bad habit of talking of nothing but Episcopalianism and theology. Since I'm not completely ignorant of these subjects, I tend to wilt under the bombardment.

And then, one time, he began to talk about the Washington Cathedral and my ears went up. He explained that the Washington Ca-

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thedral was the Vatican of American Episcopalianism, and I waited my chance.

I finally said, "Listen, have you ever spoken from the high pulpit in the Washington Cathedral?"

"Of course not," said my friend. "Don't be silly."

"I don't know what's silly about it," I said, "I did!" And I went on eating quietly.

My friend turned a beautiful magenta. He seized my lapels and demanded an explanation. I detached myself and gave him the explanation and his color receded to its normal state.

Of course, it was a stupid thing for me to do. He might easily have had a heart attack or a stroke, and you can imagine how I would have felt if that had taken place.

But, as long as we're talking about giving talks, let me take up the subject of English. There are three ways of giving talks. One is to read them (or memorize them). This is not good for it sounds artificial.

Another is to just speak, but there are very few people who can do that without going, "uh" and "um" and "if you know what I mean." That is unbelievably wearisome.

And, finally, there's the ability to speak off the top of your head without any delays. When that happens you are worth any money they are willing to pay you, and I am glad to say that it is something I can do.

And yet, neither do I speak per-

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fectly. Every once in a while I hear someone who is British and educated speak and I come all over embarrassed for I realize that I don't sound anything at all like that. In fact, in the old days, when I gave talks on the QE II, I was absolutely horrified at the sound of my own voice. I would speak to the steward and his enunciation would be so much better than mine.

In fact, I was once driving with Arthur C. Clarke in a taxi, and I listened to him talk with a great deal of envy.

"Arthur," I said, "you speak perfectly, and I speak like a taxi-driver."

And then, realizing that I was in a taxi, I leaned over to the driver and said, "I'm sorry, sir. No offense intended."

And he said, "Don't worry about it, mister. Us New Yorkers, we speak New York and that's all there is to it."

And he was right.

American schools make no attempt to teach proper English, or if they do, they fail miserably.

In fact, some years ago, they came up with a really fancy idea. They were going to teach something called "Black English." The idea was that African-Americans spoke a variation of English and they should be filled with pride over it by being actually taught to speak it. The only problem was that what they spoke was a patois that was related to English only as hamburger is related to filet mignon.

I think the idea has died out. Far from using "Black English" to fill African-Americans with pride, it served to keep them in the linguistic cellar.

This is not to imply that only African-Americans speak a substandard version of English. Almost all of us do.

The trouble is we pick up our English in the streets. There was a time when I thought that we would all listen to the pear-shaped tones of people on television (and before that, on radio) and that we would all imitate what we heard and that pretty soon all Americans would speak beautifully.

Apparently, not so. If we hear these beautiful English tones we pay no attention, and, as I said, we learn how to speak in the streets.

Heaven knows I did. To this day, I say, "Whacha doon" and "Weh ya gone," instead of "What are you doing?" and "Where are you going?" When I'm trying to locate my dear wife, Janet, I yell out, "Hey, Janet, wheriah." The last word rhymes perfectly with "Maria" and it stands for "where are you?"

Of course, that is not the way I *must* speak, and when I'm giving one of my talks, I speak nearly perfect English. I must admit though that it's a strain to do so, and sometimes even in a speech when I wish to indicate a stern refusal to do something, I will say, "Well, I ain't gonna." You have no idea how much stronger that sounds than "Well, I'm not going to."

Which brings up the subject of profanity, vulgarity, and obscen-

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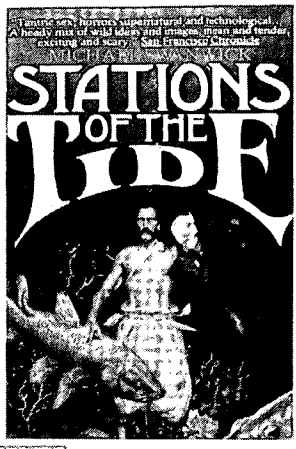
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ity. Street language does *not* have much of a vocabulary. Street speakers are therefore forced to make use of profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity when attempting to express themselves, especially if doing so forcefully.

This, of course, serves to backfire, for the use of vile language becomes so common that it no longer has meaning. (I remember when I was in the army and used to listen to the soldier boys speak—there were a few ordinary English words, interlarded with obscenity, and the obscenity had no meaning.)

You have to allow that, of course, among the uneducated, but there is no reason to allow it in correspondence between writers in the Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America. I read a number of the letters which seemed to sound just like the army and finally I could not help but object.

I wrote a letter which went something like this. "We are all writers. We should have at our command the infinite qualities and vocabulary of the glorious English language. There may not be many of us who have this command, but those of us who do should make use of it. There is nothing we cannot say, no vituperation, no angry comments, that we cannot express in the language of Shakespeare and Milton.

"Why, then, should we stoop to use the kind of language we hear in the streets as spoken by people without a vocabulary, without any knowledge of decent English, without the ability to express themselves without obscenity."

Somehow, I felt that this letter would strike at the heart of the obscenity-mongers, that it would reduce them to shame.

Fat chance! Far from feeling shame, they turned on me with dripping fangs, expressing it as their opinion that there was something wrong with me and my sex drive.

It serves me right, I suppose. I shouldn't try to uncorrupt the corrupt. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

There is a very logical reason for your magazine to publish my stories, even if you don't think they're very good. We are all aware of writers who have been inspired to submit their stories to magazines after reading a particularly uninspired piece in that magazine, and thinking to themselves, "I could do better than *that!*" However, if you continue to publish nothing but first-rate material by artistic geniuses, embryonic writers who may otherwise develop into future Asimovs, Bradburys, Heinleins, Clarkes, etc., may be so intimidated by the quality of their competition that they may never submit their first works. So you see that it is vital to the future of science fiction that there be some mediocre work in your magazine to spur on these budding Nivens, Ellisons, and Nortons of tomorrow. I am at your service.

On another matter, it is amusing that someone would insist that you allow one of your stories to be published for nothing. I believe that there are thousands of new writers out there who would be happy to allow the free publication of their amateurish work; I don't think that this person who wanted a free Asimov story would be interested in their work. Clearly your stories have *value,* and for someone to *demand* that a person *give away* something of value is the height of presumptuousness. (Where was she when you were ripping open envelopes to find your stories returned with rejection slips, in your early days?)

Sincerely,

Sam Wilson
6214 N. Winthrop #504
Chicago, IL 60660

My boy, you make use of logic very well indeed. Let us consider including a mediocre story by you just to encourage the great writers to send in their stuff.

—Isaac Asimov

Dr. A,

Just when I thought I could trust you. . . .

Or maybe I was just getting complacent.

I have always admired your writing for its directness, wry insight and humor. Whenever I see a cover with your name, I know I will be amused.

But "Kid Brother" ('way back in the Mid-December 1990 issue) reminded me that you are not just an amusing story-teller, but a master-craftsman. I was surprised, angered, touched, and ultimately sat-

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isfied. Quite a full menu from such a short story.

Thanks. I needed that!

Susan Quinland
Thousand Oaks, CA

PS: Love the 'zine. Don't like all of the stories all of the time, but who cares? If everyone liked the exactly same things, how very tedious would the world be!

Thank you. My dear wife, Janet, was afraid that the story would offend my own dear kid brother, Stan, but I told her she worries too much, and I was correct. Stan wasn't bothered.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I am writing to thank you for your editorial "Writing for Nothing," in the August issue. As a newly published author of a natural-science book for young people (*The Insect Almanac*, by Sterling), I appreciated your outburst enormously. My own similar complaint is that when the public learns that a national celebrity receives a million or five million as an advance, they expect that all authors are so nicely paid.

New writers and freelancers do not usually bring in the same rewards as do Kitty Kelly or General Schwarzkopf. Friends and relatives have asked when I am getting a new car or putting on an addition to our tiny cabin. No one ever explains to the public that a writer may wait many long months before royalties actually come in. In the meantime, you can lose your power (there goes your electric typewriter!), be hounded by collection agencies, put off a doctor's visit, retrieve old clothes out of the rag bag, and try to live on rice.

Okay, I'm crying in my beer here, but it *is* helpful to a struggling writer to learn that even a widely read successful author is not automatically treated to vast riches and wealth—as Ollie North might be!

It would be interesting to read about the early years of science fiction authors, including yourself, so that new or aspiring writers could be reassured that there *can be* a light at the end of the tunnel!

I hope you and your family are well.

Monica Russo
Arundel, ME

If you want a description of my early years as a science fiction author, get a copy of In Memory Yet Green, *the first volume of my autobiography.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I hope this letter finds you well and in good spirits.

Last week I found a treasure from my past. I found a copy of *The Illustrated Man*. I do not refer to it as a treasure in order to flatter (although I am very fond of your writing), rather, I refer to it as such because it was the first "real book" I had ever read as a child. I was in elementary school and had just been given access to the library. I was so intrigued by the cover of the book and by the wonderful promises made on the dust jacket flaps I could not wait to check it out.

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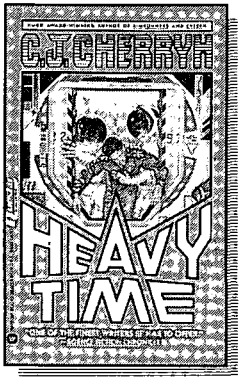

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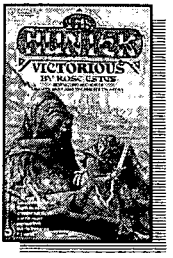
A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN

As with any territory, eventually the bold, brave opportunities of the frontier are soon replaced by the doldrums of workplaces. Heroic explorers are replaced by blue collar survivor-types for whom space is just another place on the cosmic assembly line. This is the setting for C. J. Cherryh's HEAVY TIME, a future corporate space where freelancers like Bird and Pollard soon find themselves at odds with management, where the risks of the job are life and death.

For C. J., future space is no different than the corporate worlds of today's New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles... and when you see me around, ask me about a different type of wolf, one that doesn't wear a three-piece suit.

ALSO THIS MONTH:

THE HUNTER VICTORIOUS



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From that point on, reading became one of the true joys of life. Since those days, I have found a rewarding career (as a minister and a certified clinical hypnotherapist), and I have also had the pleasure of being a published writer. I'm not famous by any means, but I certainly do enjoy the challenge!

I realize you are a busy man, so I will be brief. Would you consider signing my copy of *The Illustrated Man*? I realize it is a used copy, but I am not interested in having a "collector's item" as such. This is much more personal. This is for the little boy inside this thirty-three-year-old body who still remembers that first "real book" and how it lived up to all his imagination anticipated, and more! I will include the proper postage, padded envelope, etc. of course. I have included a return envelope for your reply.

Thank you for your time, and thank you for guiding a little boy's first step on a road which has served him well for so long.

Warmly,

W. Thomas Smith
Stella, NC

Sorry, but The Illustrated Man *was written by Ray Bradbury and not by me. The thing to do is to get Ray to give you an autograph.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Won't you please accept an orchid? (Ref: "Letters", *IAsfm*, June 1991.) You apparently suffer from an old malady: "When I am wrong, no one forgets; when I am right, no one remembers." Please be advised that I have long noted and admired your ability to write exceedingly well without excessive vulgarity (except, maybe, in *The Naked Sun*, where the word "love" . . .)

My sensibilities are not so pure that I suffer traumatic shock from reading "Adult" language, but such language seems to be the norm these days. I also sometimes enjoy a little cinnamon in my food, but not to the extent that cinnamon surpasses flour as the main ingredient.

I once read a piece by Harlan Ellison that now, years later, causes me to bypass him and to search among other authors for my reading materials. This, in spite of the undeniable fact that Mr. Ellison is an excellent writer. Perhaps I'm wrong, but the aftertaste remains. Seems to me that vulgarity for the sake of being vulgar serves no useful purpose.

You, on the other hand, with your imagination, writing ability, good taste, and obvious expertise, have, for years, been quite impressive. May I please have some more generous helpings of the same?

Meanwhile, scallions may generally be used to replace leeks.

An Asimov fan since the '50s . . .

William E. McGuire
Butler, TN

I'm sorry that you don't enjoy Harlan Ellison. He is really a very good writer, and you can bleep over his vulgarity. I admit that in my own stories I do my best to make use of no vulgarity.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have enjoyed your magazine

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since its first issue, and get as much pleasure out of your editorials and the letters as from the stories themselves.

First of all, I would like to express my admiration for your particular style of writing, not only in this and in the rival magazine where I enjoy your science article every month, but especially in your books. Your use of the English language is, in my opinion, unsurpassed. Your language is clear, precise, fluid, and in general uses just the right words to keep the smooth flow of the story going. I have a significant number of your science fiction books in my library and really enjoy re-reading them from time to time just for sheer pleasure and relaxation. English is my third language, and my superior command—compared to the average American—of the language is due in great part to reading books by great writers such as you, Rex Stout, Frederick Forsyth, and Robert Ludlum, just to name a few of my favorites.

Now I find that I must disagree, a rare occurrence, with something you wrote in answer to a letter in the June '91 issue. You stated "I feel that sloppy English is the proud hallmark of the 'He-man' American." The truth is, most Americans cannot speak properly because they have never been taught or required to do so. They have a limited vocabulary, cannot utter a complete sentence without injecting such words/sounds as "you know . . . like . . . e'rr . . . uhh . . ." and others as meaningless and detracting. Their use of vulgarisms also stems from an inability to express themselves by thinking before engaging their tongues.

You are probably sheltered from the bulk of the populace most of the time, and enjoy a wide circle of friends and associates who have the ability to think, and are able to express those thoughts in a relatively clear and precise manner. I, on the other hand, deal with large numbers of the general public daily, and I know their limits from personal observation. Their inability to speak is not their worst flaw; you should see how they write. They don't know the difference between such words as "there" and "their," "than" and "then," "behave" and "behalf," and many others. Their grammar is no better. But the saddest thing about this ineptitude is that English is their native language, and a good percentage of these people have degrees attesting to their various advanced levels of academic achievement.

I'm afraid this situation will not remedy itself until parents and schools become united in their goals, insisting that young people begin to achieve in class, rather than just filling a seat. To upgrade and promote children based on attendance, rather than achievement, as is the case in too many schools today, is doing a disservice to the children, as well as to society as a whole.

I'm afraid this letter is getting too long, so I'll make just this one more observation. Your editorial staff has, on the whole, brought me a great deal of pleasure with stories and writers who have generally been very good. The few that are not to my taste have not detracted from the overall satisfac-

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tion and enjoyment Mr. Dozois, Ms. Williams, and their predecessors have brought me every month. Sincerely,

Robert N. Schreiner
Alamogordo, NM

I must admit that your analysis of why it is that the average American can't speak English (let alone write it) strikes me as important. Thank you for the information.
—Isaac Asimov

NEXT ISSUE

April marks our fifteenth anniversary, and next month we're celebrating with a huge Double-Length Fifteenth Anniversary Issue, an immense issue jam-packed with as many stories and features as we could squeeze into it, both by Big Name Professionals and hot new stars.

Isaac Asimov himself leads off our April bill of fare, appropriately enough, returning with a huge, almost-novel-length new Foundation novella, "Cleon the Emperor." In case you've been living under a rock somewhere for the last thirty or forty years, let me point out that Isaac's Foundation series is the most popular series in the history of science fiction (voted a special Hugo Award as "Best All-Time Series" by the 1966 Worldcon), and that these new Foundation novellas (we published Isaac's first new Foundation novella in forty-one years in our November 1991 issue), the capstones to the entire Foundation saga, bringing the story of Hari Seldon—the inventor of Psychohistory—to a close, are events of major historic importance for the field. In short, this is one of the most significant events of the year—you *can't* miss this one!

But, exciting as it is, that's only the *beginning* of what we have in store for you in this immense Double Issue!

ALSO IN APRIL: Hugo and Nebula-winner **Connie Willis** returns with "Even the Queen," a wry and sure-to-be-controversial examination of a technological change so sweeping and fundamental that it affects every woman on Earth; Nebula-winner **Nancy Kress** takes us to a crowded and impoverished future society for a look at how

(continued on page 89)

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IMAGINE THE FUTURE

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REQUIEM contains many new works by the Grand Master, most of it never published in book form, including two major novellas, *Destination Moon*, which was made into the famous film, and *Tenderfoot in Space*. There are tributes from such luminaries as Arthur C. Clarke and Tom Clancy as well as an introduction by Virginia Heinlein. "A real treasure for all of Robert Heinlein's children."—**Greg Bear**.

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MEMORY OF EARTH begins a new series from the award-winning, bestselling author of XENOCIDE, Orson Scott Card ("a master of the art of storytelling"—*Booklist*), created around a magnificent, complex society on the world of Harmony, the Basilica. This is the saga of their unforgettable return back to Lost Earth in order to save Harmony from disaster.

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One of science fiction's most distinguished authors returns to our pages with a captivating story about Mars. Mr. Pohl's latest book, *Our Angry Earth*, is a nonfiction work about the damage we're doing to our environment, and the consequences and remedies thereof. It was written in collaboration with Isaac Asimov and was published by Tor books last fall. His next science fiction novel, *Mining the Oort*, will be published by Ballantine/Del Rey sometime this year. A somewhat altered version of "The Martians" will form the first part of that book.

art: Janet Aulisio

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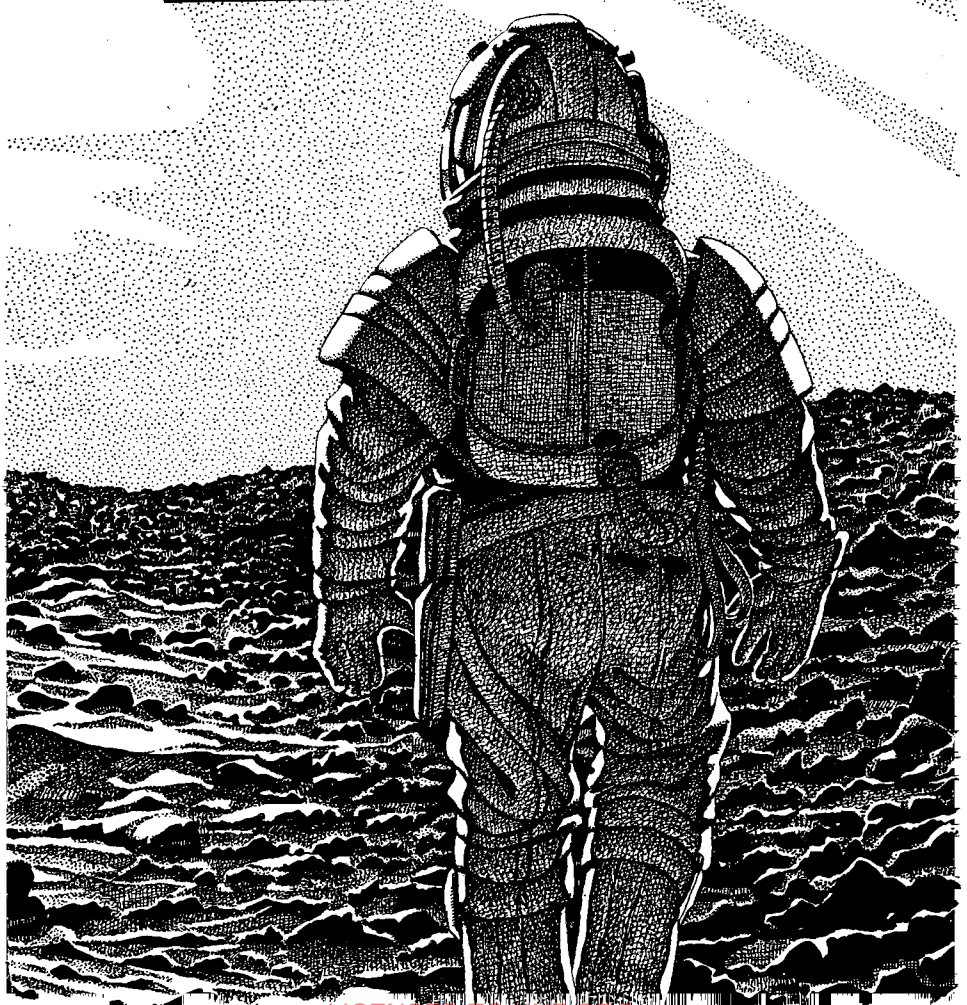
by Frederik Pohl

THE MARTIANS



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1.

There isn't anything much wrong with Mars that a decent atmosphere wouldn't fix right up. Unfortunately the place doesn't have one. Looking at it from a human point of view—and how else have humans ever looked at anything?—the mean little atmosphere Mars does have has a number of serious things wrong with it. The most important of them is that there isn't enough of it. The air pressure at the surface of the planet is a pitiful nine or ten millibars. That's so tiny that people on Earth would probably call it a vacuum, but it isn't. Quite.

That's bad news for would-be ecopoiesis engineers, as the practitioners of the fledgling science of transforming other planets into acceptable imitations of Earth call themselves. The fact that Mars is desperately short of atmospheric gases makes their job tough, but there's good news, too. The good part is that there is a place in the solar system where all those volatiles that Mars so conspicuously lacks are floating around in vast quantities, going to waste.

That place isn't very handy, but distance doesn't matter much in space, where if you give a thing the right kind of shove sooner or later it will get where you want it to go. The source of these potential Martian gases is way out in the fringes of the sun's family of satellites, far beyond even Pluto; it is where comets sail in slow, cold orbits forever, or at least until one or two happen to twitch themselves out of orbit and begin to slide down toward the sun. The name of the place is the Oort cloud.

2.

When Dekker DeWoe was seven years old—that was Mars-years, of course, because Dekker was a Martian and they didn't use the Earth calendar on Mars, or indeed anything else from Earth that they could possibly get along without—well, when Dekker was seven, the first comet came plunging down out of the Oort cloud.

That was a wonderful time. It was also a scary one for young Dekker, because nothing like that had ever happened before in his life. But mostly it was wonderful because, as everybody had been saying for as long as Dekker could remember, it meant that Mars would be alive again—some day. These days, though, it was not only wonderfully exciting, it was also a great nuisance. It meant turning his life upside down, because Dekker was going to have to pack up and move out of the comet's way.

Not just Dekker DeWoe and his mother, either. The whole population of the Martian town of Sagdayev was going, all forty-three men, women, and children, and that was definitely something for a seven-year-old to think about. It didn't *frighten* Dekker, of course. There wasn't much that frightened Dekker DeWoe. He was at an age that doesn't frighten very easily—the Earth equivalent would have been almost twelve—and anyway he had inherited courage from his pioneering parents. There were

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some things that he treated with prudent respect, though—air leaks; getting lost; The Bonds—and moving his whole town belonged in that category in his mind.

The move wouldn't be permanent, though. Evacuation was just a precaution, Dekker's mother said. The comet's impact point was supposed to be way up in the Chryse Planitia, a thousand kilometers east and north of the underground town of Sagdayev, but that wasn't quite far enough away to be safe. You didn't live long on Mars unless you made a habit of being cautious. So the Martians weren't going to take any chances. "We don't want to be anywhere near ground zero," his mother explained, fretting over what to pack and what to abandon out of their sparse possessions. "Their aim might not be that good."

"You mean the comet might hit *Sagdayev?*" Dekker asked, his eyes opening wide.

"Oh, no," his mother said, touching him, "or at least I don't think so. Well, no, I'm sure. Really. It's just that if it came too close it could shake the town up—maybe even breach the pressure integrity." She sighed, looking fretfully around their single room. "Sometimes I think we shouldn't have built Sagdayev way out here on the edge of the Bulge, but how were we supposed to know?"

Dekker didn't answer that rhetorical question, only the one that lay behind it. "The copper's here," he pointed out.

She said absently, looking around at the clutter of possessions, "I suppose. Dekker? What about leaving Brave Bear here? You don't ever play with him any more, do you?"

And reluctantly Dekker admitted that he didn't, awed by the ruthless way his mother was discarding her own second-best shoes and his late father's spare worksuit (kept only for sentiment; its air pump was old and leaky), and even the little hotplate they had sometimes used to make cocoa or even fudge in their own room, late at night. "We can come back for some of these things later," his mother explained, "maybe. *Probably,* Dekker. I think Sagdayev will be all right, but for now we aren't supposed to take more than twenty kilograms apiece."

It wasn't just personal possessions they were leaving behind, it was the whole underground town that had been carved with great effort out of the Martian soil. They closed down the little metal refinery, and domed over the entrance to their precious copper mine. They even abandoned most of the solar mirrors and photovoltaic generators that kept all the Martian settlements alive. They harvested everything that was ripe, or nearly ripe, from the glassed-in aeroponic gardens, but left the growing plants behind. They did not bother with the three hectares of glass-headed mushrooms that were doing their best to survive out on the slope of the long-dead volcano they had built on. They didn't even take the central kitchens and baths. There wasn't room. Four cargo carts had been dragged over from Sunpoint City, plus one pressurized one for people. What could not fit in the carts had to stay behind.

The adults were still loading the carts up when Dekker's mother put

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him to bed on his last night in Sagdayev. Dekker didn't cry. Seven-year-olds were too grownup to cry, but he had bad dreams that night, and when his mother woke him up before dawn he was bleary-eyed. She hustled him into his clothes and settled him in his metal-lath seat in the pressurized cart and left him there. Gerti DeWoe had been assigned as a relief driver, and so she had to ride in the big tractor that pulled the train of carts instead of sitting with her son.

It was a long trip to their haven in the metropolis of Sunpoint, more than eight hundred kilometers in a straight line, and they couldn't travel in a straight track. The area between the peak called Tharsus Tolus, where Sagdayev had been built next to its rich vein of copper ore, and the far more impressive mountain at Sunpoint City, Pavonis Mons, was fissured and uneven. They had to take endless detours, and they didn't travel very fast at best. The solar-powered tractor was slow by nature, even with all the extra sunlight accumulators on the carts. And, of course, when the sun went down no more electrical power accumulated. After sunset the tractor could keep on going only as far as the stored power in its batteries would take it, leaving enough of a prudent reserve of energy in the batteries to keep everyone alive and breathing until daybreak the next morning. All in all, they were five days en route.

It was a long five days. Most of the time Dekker had little to do except to sit there, and eat when the meals were passed around, hand over hand, and three or four times a day get up to take his turn at the cramped little toilets. They had installed four virtuals, and when Dekker got his turn at one he could call up any kind of entertainment in the store. That was pretty good, watching old stories unroll all around him, or even catching up on his schoolwork. But that only happened for an hour or two a day. All in all, the trip was a test of their training for all the Martians from Sagdayev. If they hadn't all been schooled from birth in Manners and Consideration and Non-Aggressive Interaction there might even have been fistfights. There almost were anyway—more raised voices, or angry, hissing ones, than Dekker was used to hearing, at least. But he himself was too young to be involved in any of the petulant near-quarrels among the grownups.

Dekker wasn't entirely alone. Three or four times a day his mother would call him on the phone line from the tractor cab, just to chat, and between times one of her friends was always there because he had taken the next seat. The friend, though, was old Tinker Gorshak. Dekker didn't really like Tink Gorshak. He was glad enough to have the man's shoulder to fall asleep against, but then Tink always seemed to want to talk. He would say things Dekker already knew—"You're going to like Sunpoint, Dek; it's *big*. And they've got the Skyhook there!" Or he'd promise Dekker what good times he was going to have playing—"playing"!—with Tinker's Sunpoint grandson, Tsumi Gorshak—as though there were any possibility that a big seven-year-old was ever going to have fun "playing" with a little kid of three. Or he would tell Dekker what a wonderful

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woman his mother was; which Dekker already knew, and didn't want to hear anyway from somebody whose motives filled him with suspicion.

But you couldn't say that Tinker Gorshak wasn't kind. Even generous. He was certainly as bored and restless as Dekker himself, and yet half the time when it was Tinker's turn to have half an hour with a virtual he would grin and pass it over to the boy; and then Dekker would be living some fine story or, better still, just switching the virtual to what was happening outside the caravan; and there he would be in the virtual reality of the panorama around them, the tractor and trailers disappeared, only his own invisible self to see what was there as they crawled deliberately across the cracked and rocky surface of Mars, with the umber and ebon mountains moving slowly past him in the distance, and overhead the million diamond-brilliant stars of the Martian sky and the long sweep of the comet's tail to watch, and wonder.

Years later, Dekker remembered that trip as a wonderful adventure, the kind you tell your children about when you get old enough to have any. But, oh, it was *long*. So he endured. He did his schoolwork, and practiced his docility skills, and slept as much as he could, and always had the comforting presence of the earless, eyeless, stuffed toy he had slipped into his suit at the last minute, when his mother was looking the other way; because when push came to shove even seven-year-old Dekker DeWoe hadn't been willing to leave Brave Bear to face the cometary impact alone.

3.

The best thing Mars had (at least, the Martians mostly thought so) was the Skyhook at Sunpoint City, and that didn't come with the planet's original equipment. It had had to be built (by Earthies, as a matter of fact—so they weren't all bad). The Skyhook had a kind of interesting history. It was one of the two critically important human inventions (the other was the Augenstein antimatter drive, which made possible the fleets of spaceships that made a Skyhook worth building in the first place) which had been invented long before there was any need for either of them—in fact, long before there was any possibility of actually building one. The man who devised the first "space elevator" was an engineer from Leningrad named Yuri Artsutanov, and he had done it way back in 1960. That was pretty far-sighted of him. No human being had managed to reach even the fringe of space in 1960, and the kind of materials that you could possibly build such a thing with didn't even exist then anyway. But it was Artsutanov who proposed that if one were to position a satellite in geostationary orbit right over a planet's equator, and hang a cable 36,000 kilometers long from it, the whole lash-up would amount to an "orbital tower." Then you could run elevators up and down the cable of this orbital tower, and then ships and cargoes and people could

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be lifted from the planet's surface right into orbit for damn near nothing. Well, for so much less than trying to do the same thing with rockets that the difference didn't matter.

It all worked out just the way Artsutanov thought it would. Once the Augenstein antimatter drive came along and made spaceships fast and fairly cheap themselves, it became feasible to junket all around the solar system—once you got into orbit. But that first step was the hardest, and that was what the Skyhook was for.

Not that that first Skyhook itself had been all that cheap. The Earth one had been strung from Nairobi on the surface to geosynchronous orbit, and its construction had cost about as much as an average war. But when they came to do the same thing for Mars the price was slashed way down. The reason for that was that they didn't have to hoist all the materials that went into it from the surface of the planet to space. Mars's Skyhook *started* in space: ores from the asteroids, fabricated in orbit, made the whole thing, and then Mars was only an elevator ride from the rest of the universe. Those first daring, dedicated Martian colonists could then import just about anything they liked. All they had to do was pay the import bills.

4.

Sunpoint City was a whole other thing than Sagdayev. Sunpoint City's mountain was the truly impressive Pavonis Mons, topping out at twenty kilometers, and startling to look at. Even for Martian-born Dekker DeWoe. The city sat right on the Martian equator—that was of course why it was called "Sunpoint." Therefore, it was the point where the Skyhook touched down, and therefore, the metropolis of the planet.

The other impressive thing about Sunpoint City was that, by Martian standards, it was *vast*. There were more than nine hundred people living in its nearly three kilometers of underground tunnels and chambers, all carved out of the soil under the Martian surface caliche and doubly sealed to keep the precious atmosphere inside.

Dekker DeWoe was awed. He had never seen so many *strangers* before. Some of them were really strange—in fact, some were not Martians at all. Sunpoint was where off-planet visitors arrived, and where many of them stayed. It held several dozen Germans, Americans, Ukrainians, Japanese, Brazilians—whole families of them—people from *Earth!* As they strolled together down one of the passageways Dekker's mother pointed a group of the Earthies out, three or four grownups and a couple of children. "Take a good look," she whispered. "You won't see them very often." Dekker knew why. The Earthies kept pretty much to themselves, in their own luxurious quarters.

"Can I see where they live?" he asked.

"Well, we can walk by their section," his mother said, after a moment's thought. "We haven't been invited in, though." But when they got to the

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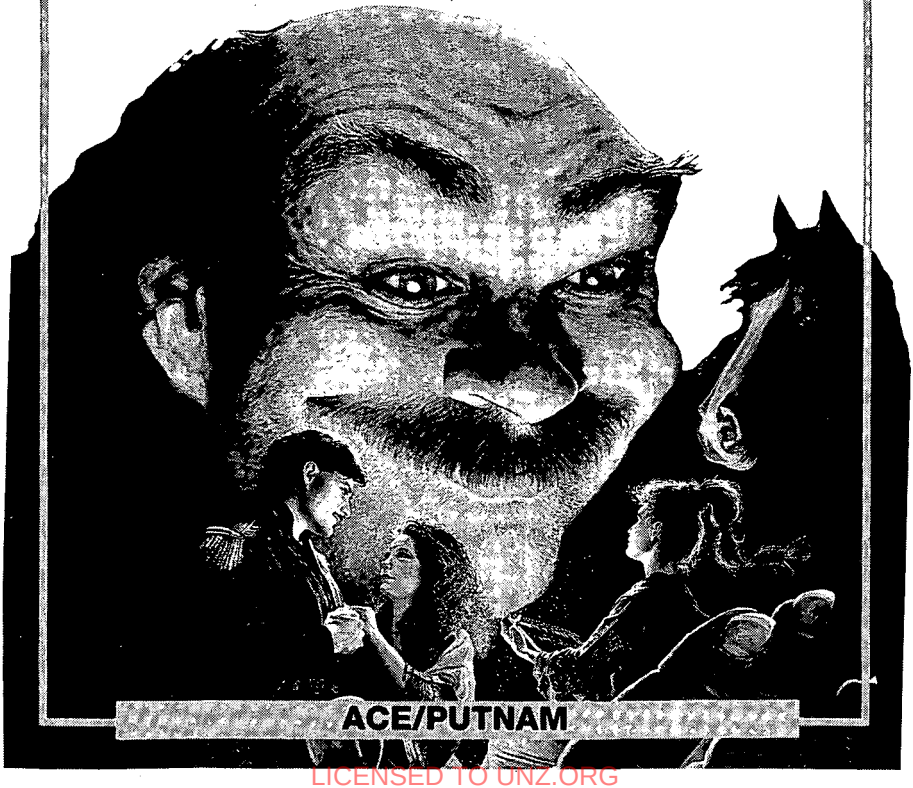

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Earthie quarter, a level down from the (slightly) risky top sections of Sunpoint, there wasn't much to see. It looked pretty much like any other part of the city, just another corridor, though conspicuously marked "Diplomatic Area." Loud music was coming out of it, though. That was certainly strange; people didn't trespass on other people's hearing, did they? It did not look any grander than the corridor that held the DeWoes' own borrowed cubicle—not from the entrance, anyway—though Dekker did notice something strange about it. A dozen small rectangles of patterned, colored fabric hung from sticks in the walls. "They're pretty," Dekker said, to be polite.

"They're *flags*," his mother explained. "The one with the red stripes, I think that's the flag for America." And then as they walked back to their own place she startled him by telling him that, down that corridor, the Earthies had private rooms for each person, as well as such other unimaginable luxuries as bathtubs and even *pets*. "Two of the Earthie families have cats," his mother sniffed when they were back in their own quarters, "and Tinker says there used to be a parrot, but it died." And when he asked how the Earthies could afford such wanton waste, she said somberly, "Earthies can afford *anything*, Dekker. Especially because, you know, we're the ones who'll be paying for it."

"Oh, right," he said, enlightened. "The Bonds."

"The Bonds," Tinker Gorshak growled from the doorway, surprising Dekker, who hadn't known he was there. "Earthies and The Bonds," he said, moving his mouth as though he wanted to get the words out.

He wasn't alone, either. A little kid was hanging on one of Tinker's legs, thumb in his mouth, staring at Dekker. "This is my grandson," the old man said proudly. "We came by to see if you needed any help. You boys are going to have fun together, Dek."

Feeling his mother's eye on him, Dekker put out his hand to shake the kid's. He pulled it back quickly; it was the one Tsumi had had in his mouth, and it was still spit-wet, but Tinker, not noticing, went back to his subject. "The Earthies say they're here to supervise their investments, but they're really tourists. They came to watch the fireworks show! And we're paying a thousand dollars a day for each one of them."

Dekker's mother shook her head at him, but all she said was, "As long as you're here, come on, help me get everything put away."

That didn't take long for the refugees from Sagdayev—even with the pesty little kid getting in the way—since they didn't have many possessions to stow. The funny thing was, Tinker told them, that all over Sunpoint the locals were engaged in the same activity. The refugees from Sagdayev thought it was pretty funny that the Sunpointers should be worrying about the comet impact for themselves. There could be no doubt that Sunpoint City was far enough away to be safe, even from ground tremors. Mars was too old to suffer much seismic activity, even when some tens of thousands of tons of cometary material smashed onto its crust. All the same, since the refugees were guests of Sunpoint City, it was only good manners to help their hosts. So they all turned to and

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helped out in getting everything battened down, books off the shelves, walls braced, breakables stowed away, emergency crews practicing damage control with sealant in case the outside walls sprang a leak.

The trouble with everybody being busy was that Dekker had to be busy too. Not with anything *useful*. With *baby-sitting*. It was Tinker's idea, but Gerti DeWoe endorsed it. "Of course you can keep an eye on Tsumi," she said reasonably. "You'll be a big help. Tinker's got all he can do, and so does Tsumi's father." So did she. She didn't say that, but she didn't have to, so Dekker resigned himself to the company of the brat.

The trouble was that the brat wasn't interested in showing Dekker around Sunpoint City, which could have been interesting. He wanted Dekker to play with him, and Dekker got pretty tired of playing little kids' games. Tsumi didn't even want to use the virtual reality hoods, although it was a heaven-sent opportunity for kids, with everyone else so busy that most of the time the hoods were idle. But the brat wouldn't sit still. It was a welcome break when it came time for their docility class, because, of course, it never mattered how busy things got or how little spare time anyone had. There was *always* time for docility training, because the world, the *worlds*, had passed the point where they could survive without it.

And every night on the flat screens there were pictures of the approaching comet, a big, dirty snowball, ten kilometers through.

Its temperature was no longer at the icy cold of its birth out in the almost-interstellar Oort cloud, because it had already swung around close to the sun to slow itself down before climbing back out to intercept Mars. It was warming up. Some of its gases were making its spectacular tail, and even its core was growing fuzzy.

Watching the thing grow on the news screens didn't satisfy Dekker. It was not anything like being up on the surface itself, in facemask and thermal suit. So when Dekker's mother was asked to go outside to help secure the city's all-important solar power cells, Dekker invited himself to join the work party. The brat would certainly not be there. It was going to be fun to be out with the workers, even though Tinker Gorshak would be there, too.

5.

Mars isn't entirely without water. But neither is desert sand, if you work hard enough to get the bound water of crystallization out of the grains, and if you're content with a tiny reward. Mars has water (frozen) in the polar ice caps—much good may that do anyone. There's water, frozen in mud, under the surface caliche, but it stays there because the sun doesn't heat the surface enough to melt much of it out. Some parts of Mars are marked with the evidence that there once was real flowing

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water there, namely such scarring as floodplains, and the dendritic riverbeds called lahars. Perhaps streams once did flow in the lahars, when some brief volcanic flurry melted some of that frozen mud and forced it to the surface, so that it flowed downhill until it evaporated into the parched air. It doesn't do that any more. When people first came to Mars some of them tried to melt out the icy mud under the hardpan. If, they thought, you could drive out some of those volatiles you could increase the density of the atmosphere . . . which would warm things up . . . which would help drive out more volatiles. Or, to put it in another way, if you had some eggs you could make ham and eggs, if you had some ham.

6.

The grotesque, rusty Martian landscape was the only landscape Mars-born Dekker DeWoe had ever known. He would not have tried to tell anyone it was beautiful. Few children think of such things in the ordinary course of their lives, and Mars was very ordinary to Dekker. He found the scenery he lived in unsurprising and, actually, quite homey.

Going out with the work party onto the rubbly plain was a welcome break from the tunnels of Sunpoint City, especially since Tsumi Gorshak hadn't been allowed along. Tsumi's grandfather, though, kept getting on Dekker's nerves. Tinker insisted on *helping*. Every time Dekker picked up one edge of the great sheets of protective film, Gorshak materialized beside him to lend a hand, grinning silently through the faceplate of his suit. Dekker hated that. The old man treated him as though he were a *child*.

Dekker generally spent a lot of time trying to stay away from Tinker Gorshak, and it wasn't only because of his pesky grandkid. Tinker had faults of his own. To begin with, he was an old, old man. He was nearly forty in Martian years, or around seventy by Earth's standards; after all, he even had grandchildren. Tinker Gorshak was, in fact, one of the very earliest Martian settlers. For that reason, Dekker had a certain amount of respect for Tinker Gorshak, but Dekker was wary of him, too, because he knew why the old man was always trying to be his friend. Gorshak kept on doing things for the boy—taking him along on survey trips, or to check the slow growth of the crystal mushroom plantations; bringing him little presents of apples and strawberries as the aeroponic crops grew in the hothouses; asking him how he was doing at school. Dekker wasn't deceived. He didn't want the gifts, and he didn't think Gorshak specially cared about how he was doing. What Tinker Gorshak wanted was to marry widowed Gertrud DeWoe, and Dekker really didn't want his mother marrying again.

What made it hard to rebuff Gorshak's offers of help was the fact that, although Dekker did his best to help secure the photovoltaic mirrors, the job really called for adult muscles. It required wrestling huge sheets of film over the long mirrors and the troughs of photocells that turned the

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sunlight into electrical power. It was also, the people from Sagdayev muttered to each other, pretty much a waste of time. True, it was common sense that nobody ever took chances with their power supplies. If anything happened to the photovoltaic cells, the city of Sunpoint would be in desperate trouble. But what could happen to them? No pieces of the comet would stray so far as to destroy Sunpoint City's mirrors. There might well be some hellish huge dust storms; those were always a problem on Mars. But every town's photovoltaic arrays had survived plenty of them before.

So Dekker wasn't much help with the suited, sweating men and women unfurling the great film sheets, and it didn't make things easier when he could hardly keep his eyes on the ground because so much was fascinating in the sky. There was the great comet itself, its glowing, milky tail spreading almost from horizon to horizon even in the bright midday sunshine. Even more exciting for the boy from the back hills, there were the skinny spiderweb cables that stretched up to invisibility where the Skyhook did its work of carrying capsules between surface and orbit.

It was also true that Dekker simply wasn't strong enough, especially in the heat of the day. Where Sunpoint sat on the Martian equator, in the middle of this summer day, the temperature was over twenty degrees Celsius. When Dekker dropped his end of a sheet for the third time Tinker Gorshak hand-signaled to him angrily and his mother came over and pressed her facemask against his own. "Better give it up, Dekker," she advised, her voice thin and faint. "Go find something else to do. We'll finish this without you."

Dekker signaled agreement gladly enough. There was indeed something else that he preferred to do, and he had only been waiting for the chance.

Deceitfully, he started back in the direction of the city lock, craning over his shoulder to see what the work party was doing. When he was sure they were too busy to be bothering with him any more, he changed direction, hurried along in the shelter of the mirrors and headed out for the open plain.

The scenery before Dekker's eyes was all brand-new to him. What he saw when he looked around the Martian surface was shadow like ink, boulders rose and rust, pink sky with the small, bright sun overhead. It not only wasn't like Earth, it wasn't much like Dekker's familiar back yard, either. Sagdayev's soil was browner and grayer at this time of year; here at Sunpoint it was all pink windblown sands over the caliche. An Earthie might not have seen a difference between the two, but Dekker did.

Of course, that was only natural. All Martians knew that no one but the Martians knew what Mars really looked like. The mudsuckers could never understand. There was an Earth TV show that Dekker and the other Martian settler kids sometimes watched, because it was funny. It wasn't *meant* to be funny. It was supposed to be a kind of soap opera

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about passions and perversions among the Martian colonists, but any Martian could see that the whole thing was computer-shot in studios somewhere on Earth. Good enough to fool the mudsuckers. Nevertheless an obvious *fake*.

When Dekker had put a kilometer's worth of hillocks between himself and the work party he stopped. It was as bright as daylight ever got on Mars, and the sun as hot. Dekker turned down the heating coils in his suit and looked up at the sky.

The comet was majestic above him.

The thing was immense. Its tail now was forked into two streams of milky light, hardly dimmed by the sunlight. It spread from the western horizon, up past the midday sun and the spindly Skyhook, almost to the top of the mountain to the east. Dekker could hardly take it in all at once. The mask wasn't built for sky-gazing. Although it gave nearly 360-degree vision in all horizontal directions, it wasn't made for looking up.

So, being well away from any interfering grownups, Dekker did what he had to do to observe the spectacle. He lay down on the rusty, pebbly Martian soil. He leaned against the side of a little boulder that wore a reddish yarmulke of dust on its top, and gazed straight up. He slipped his arm out of the sleeve of his suit, fumbled in his waist pouch for a biscuit, and with two fingers eased it past the stiff helmet collar. He nibbled the biscuit thoughtfully while he admired the comet.

Dekker was feeling happy. It wasn't just the comet that Dekker wanted to find, out on the barren plains of the dead planet. There was something else there for him, and its name was "privacy."

Dekker didn't spend much time thinking about whether he disliked living in an underground town, where everyone was always in everyone else's pocket. He had no other life to compare it with; he had lived in Sagdayev since he was born. Dazzlingly huge as Sunpoint was to him, it was only a larger Sagdayev. There was no chance in any Martian settlement for the solitude a young boy needs. So as soon as he was old enough to be trusted out by himself Dekker had spent a lot of his free time roaming out of sight among the barren dunes. Out there, he had seen the comet almost as soon as the naked eye could detect it at all, more than a year earlier, when it was only a minute pearly blotch in the nighttime sky—followed it down toward its rendezvous with the sun until it was lost in the solar glare—picked it up again as it began its return toward Mars orbit. Now it was certainly a spectacular sight. It didn't really look like green fields and rainstorms and cloudy sunsets. But that was what it was supposed to turn into—though of course Dekker knew that this comet was only the first and tiniest beginning of the long effort to make Mars live—

He blinked and squirmed around in his suit. He became aware that he was feeling a slithery, clattery vibration from the soil under him, and jumped to his feet.

A buggy was coming toward him, heading in the direction of the town. He couldn't hear it, of course. No one heard much in the scanty Martian

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atmosphere, but he could see the buggy clearly as it topped a rise, and evidently the driver saw him. The vehicle hesitated, then made a sharp turn. Rusty pebbles flew like spray from one set of its great mesh wheels; then all wheels spun together and it rolled rapidly to his side. It stopped with the nearest wheel almost touching him, and a young girl looked down at him from the enclosed control seat.

Dekker realized he had seen her before. She was one of the Earthies his mother had pointed out, and he had even heard her name. Anna? Annette? Something like that. There was no question that she was an Earthie, anyway. Dekker didn't have to recognize her face to know that, because no Martian child would have been allowed a buggy of her own just to wander around in.

She was gesturing for him to climb up and join her inside the buggy.

Dekker scowled up at the girl. He hadn't come out onto the plain to talk to some spoiled Earth brat! But she had already ruined his solitude, and anyway it was easier for him to do it than to try to argue about it. He gave in, stepped between the metal mesh wheels, each one twice as tall as Dekker himself, and climbed the spike ladder into the little entrance.

When the air hissed in and the inner door clicked he opened the door and unsealed his face mask to look at her.

"Are you lost?" the girl asked. "You shouldn't go out here by yourself. What would happen if you fell or something? Your father's going to give you hell, boy!"

"I'm not lost," he told her. He didn't bother to tell her all the ways in which she was wrong. If he fell! He supposed she meant if he broke a leg or something—imagine breaking a leg here! Where there was nothing high enough to fall from, and only the gentle Martian gravity to speed the fall. Even if he had somehow managed to knock himself unconscious the suit radio would immediately send out a distress signal and someone would be out to rescue him in minutes.

There was one other thing she was very wrong about. His father would certainly never punish him, since he didn't have one, but he wasn't prepared to talk about that to this young female mudsucker from Earth.

"I guess you just wanted to look at the comet, like me," she said, studying his face. "My name's Annetta Cauchy."

He shook her hand, mostly to show that he knew Earth customs. "I'm Dekker DeWoe." And, to show that he recognized her, "You're Mr. Cauchy's daughter."

She nodded graciously, as though he had given her a compliment. "Isn't the comet pretty?" she asked, making polite conversation.

"I guess so."

She nodded again, satisfied with his concurrence. Then she advised him, "You ought to like it. It costs a zillion dollars to bring those things here, and my daddy, the underwriter, is one of the people paying for it."

He didn't answer that. He had heard all he wanted to hear about what the Earthies were paying for, and what they were going to want in

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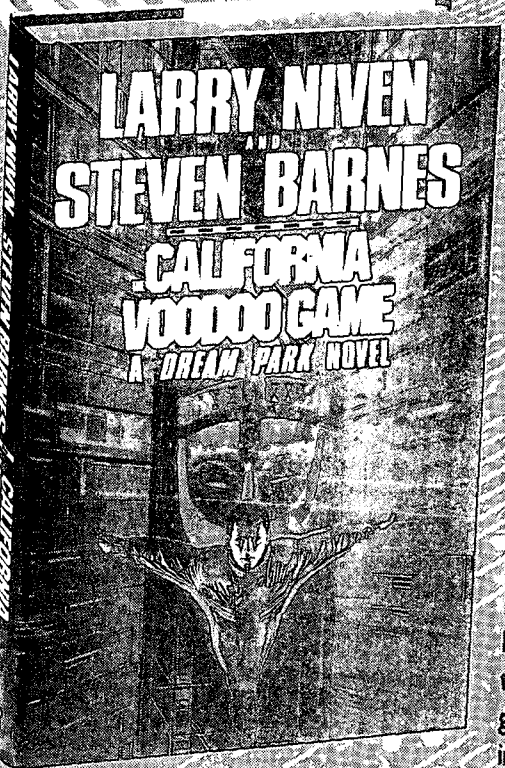

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return. Anyway, she didn't seem to expect an answer. She was pointing out the window to the Skyhook cable, where a capsule was sliding swiftly down toward the touchdown on the far side of Sunpoint. "My daddy's firm helped pay for that, too," she told him. "It's nice. I rode down it when I came from Earth with my parents. I'll be going up it again when we go home. Would you like to go into space some day?"

"Of course I would. I will," Dekker said sternly, "some day."

The girl looked skeptical but polite. She sighed to show she was changing the subject, but without prejudice to her own opinions, and frowned as she looked around at the mountainside. "Tell me, Dekker," she said. "Don't you think this is pretty well creepy? It looks like somebody's just thrown rocks around."

Dekker gazed at the landscape, puzzled. "How else should it look?"

"But it's *boring*. Doesn't it ever change?"

Dekker said defensively, "I don't know about here. Around Sagdayev it's pretty in the winter."

"You mean snow?"

"Snow?" He stared at her, marveling at her ignorance. "There isn't any *snow*, but sometimes there are frost shadows around the rocks, and things."

She looked unconvinced, and smug about it, but all she said was, "Well, I think I'd better take you home. Are you hungry?"

"No," he said, but when he saw that she had picked up a little gilt candy box to offer him he changed his mind. He took one. That was just good manners, but then he discovered that it tasted really fine. It was chocolate! And something fruity and sweet and wonderful inside; and, since she had left the box out, he took another. Dekker didn't think his mother would have approved of that, but he knew Earthies didn't have the same standards of manners as Martians.

The girl put her hands on the controls. "Take off your suit," she ordered over her shoulder as she advanced the speed levers on both sets of wheels. She didn't ease them gently forward as a proper buggy driver would have done but just thrust them almost to full-out. Naturally the buggy wheels spun, wasting energy.

"You're going to wear your treads out that way," he informed her, meaning to add that he didn't want to be driven back to Sunpoint anyway, as he was perfectly capable of walking.

But she had left the box of chocolates out, and didn't seem to mind when he took a third, and then a fourth.

7.

Even if you managed to pump Mars's atmosphere up to the 1000-millibar pressure of the Earth's, you couldn't breathe the stuff anyway. It simply doesn't contain what people need for breathing.

The first thing you think of is oxygen, of course. Well, actually, there's

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a certain amount of oxygen to be found in Mars's air. In fact, more than half of what atmosphere there is on Mars is oxygen—kind of. The trouble is, that oxygen is already tightly locked up into carbon dioxide. Only five percent of the negligible quantity of air Mars possesses is anything *but* that useless carbon dioxide,in fact, and a lot of that five percent is equally useless stuff like argon. No. That won't do to support human life. What Mars needs to make it green is hydrogen (to react with some of that oxygen to create water) and nitrogen (to mix with the rest of the oxygen in order to reduce the air to something people could breathe without burning out their lungs—and, oh, yes, so that you can eat, because plants won't grow without nitrogen anyway).

8.

When they got back to the entry, the girl mated her crawler with the city lock skillfully enough, Dekker watching critically but finding little to criticize. He followed her inside, sealed the door himself, and turned around to see that someone was watching them. It was another mud-sucker, male, a few years older than Dekker, short and squat of course, looking amused. Annetta greeted him warmly. "Dekker," she said, "I'd like you to meet my friend Evan."

"Hi," Dekker said politely, shaking the young man's hand. "But I have to go, there's something I have to do. Thanks for the candy."

The one named Evan didn't seem to mind that at all. He was already turning away from Dekker, talking to the girl: "Listen, Netty, about the party tonight—" he began, but Dekker was rapidly moving away.

It wasn't entirely true that there was something he had to do. He did, of course. Sooner or later; because even though they were in a strange city, and in spite of the fact that the comet was due to strike in a matter of hours, and regardless of all the effort involved in protecting Sunpoint's destructibles against possible harm—in spite of all these things, the essential functions of life on Mars went on. For Dekker, one of them was the compulsory daily class in Getting Along.

But he had an hour or so to go before he had to be there, and he spent it roaming around. Blessedly alone, for Tsumi was, no doubt, grumpily tending the capybaras by himself.

Nothing was the same here as in Sagdayev. The place was not only bigger, it was laid out funny. But mostly it was *huge*—six levels deep, against Sagdayev's three—and Dekker had a satisfying hour or so just roaming it, always remembering to look as though he had some important errand so that no one would ask him what he was doing.

He cut it a little fine. When it was time to get to docility he suddenly realized he didn't know where to go. He asked directions; but with all the pre-impact excitement nobody seemed to know where anything was happening, and so he arrived in the classroom where thirty or forty kids

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were crowded into a space meant for no more than half that when the Pledge of Assistance was just about to begin.

Dekker slid into a seat on the floor, next to Tsumi's accusing gaze, and joined the recital:

"I pledge my life
to those who share it,
to the safety and well-being of my planet,
and all who live in it.
One world,
with liberty and justice for all,
through sharing."

But everybody was looking at him, and as soon as they were finished Tsumi whispered, "You're late."

He wasn't alone. The proctor was pointing at him. "Punctuality," the young man said, a ten-year-old with a sparse beard, "is the courtesy of kings. What's your name?"

"Dekker DeWoe," the boy admitted.

"Dekker DeWoe. Well, Dekker DeWoe, it is as bad to take someone's time by lateness as to take his property."

"I meant no offense," said Dekker automatically, looking around. There weren't any Earth children in the class. Perhaps Earthies didn't need to be taught to be non-aggressive. Or perhaps they didn't care.

"Then let's begin. I haven't met all of you before, so let's get back to basics. This is docility training. What do we mean by 'docility'?"

He looked around. A Sunpoint five-year-old in the first row had her hand up already. "Docility is learning to consider the needs of society and other people," she said.

"That's right. We're not passive, are we? But we're docile; which is to say, we're civilized. And, being civilized people, we just made our Pledge of Assistance. Does everybody do that?"

"Everybody on Mars," the same girl said at once; and another put in: "Everybody in space, even, the Loonies and everybody. But not the Earthies."

The proctor nodded. "That's true. The Earth people have their own kind of training—well, they have to, don't they? Or they'd still be having wars there. But they make a different kind of pledge in their schools; they pledge 'allegiance.' What does that mean?"

Dekker knew the answer to that, and it was a good time to regain a little favor. "It means they pledge to be loyal, and that kind of means you'll do what someone tells you."

"Exactly," the proctor said, looking surprised. "They pledge allegiance to a flag. Do we have a flag?"

Silence among the younger children—for Dekker, too, because he was interested in hearing the answer. Finally a girl almost as old as the proctor put her hand up. "No, because we don't need one. We have each other."

The proctor nodded. "Right. What flags are for," he went on, settling

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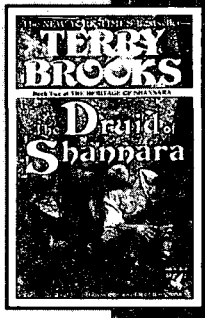

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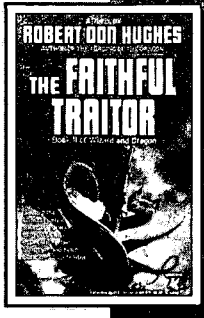

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into his lecture for the day, "is so you can see which side is which when you're fighting. So you know who to *kill*." He waited for the little gasp of shock from his audience. He got it.

He went on, "Yes, they killed people for their flags, and the terrible thing, friends, is that the people doing the killing *liked* it. Oh, they didn't like getting killed themselves—or burned, or paralyzed, or blinded—but they thought that fighting gave them a chance to be *heroes*. What's a 'hero,' anybody?"

Beside Dekker little Tsumi's hand shot up. He didn't wait to be called, but shouted out: "Somebody very brave who does great things!"

The proctor gave him a measuring look. "That's one way to look at it, yes," he said, in a tone that showed he thought that way was the wrong way. "But that depends on what you mean by 'great,' doesn't it? People used to have a different idea of heroes. They used to think they were like gods—and what they thought about gods, those days, was that they always did what they wanted to, they didn't question themselves, they shoved people around any way they wanted to, and they always thought they were right. That's what a man named Bernard Knox wrote once; he said heroes were like gods, and he said, 'Heroes might be, usually were, violent, antisocial, destructive.' Now tell me, friends. Would we call people like that heroes? Or would we see anything heroic in a *war?*"

Resoundingly the class roared, "No." Even Dekker. But not, he saw with surprise, little Tsumi, who was sitting next to him with his thumb in his mouth and a thoughtful expression on his face.

They never did finish the class. Just as the proctor was getting into the main work-together docility activity—it was a cooperative project, building a geodesic structure out of struts and cords, impossible to do unless every member of the group held and lifted and pulled just at the right moment in his turn—there was a harsh alarm beeping for a blowout drill.

It was only practice, of course. It was always only practice—except the one time when, maybe, it would be real, and that was the one you always had to be ready for; so you didn't fool around in the practice. Everyone scattered to check the automatic corridor seals and the room doors and vents, everything closed off and airtight, all over Sunpoint City, in a matter of a minute or two; and then nothing to do except to sit there, in a little room with the air motionless and almost beginning to stale, for a few more minutes until the lights blinked three times and the long wailing beep sounded "all clear."

Then the docility class had disintegrated, the proctor long gone to his duty post for the drill, and Dekker looked around for a while for Tsumi Gorshak, but not very hard, and then went back to the room he shared with his mother for a nap.

His conscience was clear, and his hopes high: He wanted to stay awake as much as he could that night, so as to not miss a moment of the comet's final approach and strike.

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He woke when he heard someone coming in the door, and sat up quickly, hoping it would be his mother. It was only Tinker Gorshak, though, looking surprised. "So there you are," he said. "Your mother wondered. She had to go to a meeting, but she said we might as well eat here tonight, so we could watch the comet together. She's a wonderful woman, Dek."

Dekker nodded resignedly, measuring out enough water in the bowl to wash his face and run a comb through his hair. "We're going to eat here?"

"We're going to cook our own dinner," Tinker said, offering good news as a gift. "Just the three of us—I wish Tsumi could have been along, but he has to be with his dad tonight. Now, give me a hand while I braise the cappy for the stew."

Dekker did as he was told, helping to get the dinner ready. It really was a treat for him and his mother to cook something up together instead of going to the community dining hall—but not necessarily with Tinker Gorshak sticking himself in. Dekker would have been almost as happy to go to the hall.

Their tiny room was somewhat gloomy (well, everywhere in Sunpoint was gloomy now, only one light allowed per room to conserve power in case of accident—and hot, too, with all the climate machines turned down to barely tolerable levels). But it was an occasion, and so they were allowed to have the news screen on.

Naturally the screen was relaying the satellite observations, as they followed the comet. When Dekker looked up to the screen he could see the comet's core; it was the grayish-yellow color of old Tinker Gorshak's beard, lumpy as a Jerusalem artichoke. It was spinning slowly, with the drive jets now spitting out slow-down correction burns every few seconds.

He checked the time. There was still a long way to go. The actual impact was scheduled to take place in mid-morning—mid-morning according to the time it would be at the impact point, that was, though it would be nearly noon at Sunpoint in its position to the east. "That's so it will be a kind of grazing hit," Tinker Gorshak informed the boy as they were preparing their meal. "There'll be less kinetic energy released that way, they think, so maybe less ground shock. How are you doing with those onions?"

"They're almost chopped," Dekker reported, rubbing at his stinging eyes with the back of his hand.

Gorshak dumped the chopped onions into the stew, stirred it, sniffed it critically, then put the lid on. "It'll be ready in twenty minutes," he declared. "Gerti ought to be back before then, and if she isn't it'll just get better the longer it simmers. What do you say, Dekker, do you want something to drink? Tea? Water?"

Dekker shook his head, and watched the old man carefully measure out a "highball"—straight alcohol, diluted with water one to three, flavored with a little mint extract. Dekker wrinkled his nose. That was one of the other things Dekker didn't like about Tinker Gorshak. Dekker's

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father had never been known to drink alcohol, or at least as far as Dekker remembered he hadn't. Nor had his mother, as long as his father was alive. "So," said Gorshak, swallowing the first half of his drink discontentedly. "Have you been thinking about what you want to do when you grow up?"

"Not much," Dekker admitted.

"I mean," Gorshak explained, "it's all going to be different, now that it looks like the crystal plants are a dead end." He got that discontented look he always had when the subject of the purpose-built Martian plants came up. "I always hoped—"

He stopped there without saying what he had hoped, but he didn't have to. Dekker knew what it was. As a geneticist, Tinker Gorshak's main job on Mars had been tending and crossbreeding the artificially produced photosynthetic plants—well, organisms—you could hardly really call them "plants," because they certainly didn't look like anything that had ever grown on the Earth—that the Martians had hoped would produce some sort of natural crops for them. They were pretty little things, mushroom shaped, with parasols of ultraviolet-opaque crystal on their tops. The crystal let the light necessary for photosynthesis in, but screened out the deadly ultraviolet—necessary on Mars, without an ozone layer to protect them. They were wonderful in that they grew at all.

That was where the wonderfulness stopped. As a crop, the glass-headed mushrooms were hopeless. They had to have long taproots to get down to the little frozen water under Mars's hard-crusted surface, and so much of their metabolic energy had to go into the work of sinking their roots and building their sunscreens that there was nothing to speak of that was worth harvesting.

But that had all been Tinker Gorshak's fantasy, anyway. It certainly hadn't been Dekker's. As far as Dekker had thought about his grownup career, which wasn't very far, he had leaned more toward the sort of thing his father had done—power engineer and general machine handler—than to following the career of the man who wanted to usurp his father's place.

Fortunately for Dekker, his mother arrived then. She looked both amused and surprised.

"I've got a message for you, Dekker," she told the boy. "You're invited to a party."

That startled Dekker. He blinked at his mother. Who in Sunpoint did he know well enough to invite him to anything? But the biggest surprise was when his mother told him, "It's an Earth girl. Annetta Cauchy. She says her parents are having a pre-impact dinner, and she wants you to come."

Dekker opened his eyes wide in surprise, but not as surprised as Tinker Gorshak.

"You've been getting around in a hurry," the old man grumbled in astonishment.

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"I'm glad to see you making friends so fast," Gertrud said. She waited in silence for her son to say something. When he didn't she asked, "What about it? Do you want to go?"

"Now, wait a damn minute," Gorshak said, scowling. "I thought we were going to have a little private party right here. Just family." He reached over to pat Dekker's knee, and didn't notice when Dekker, who didn't consider Tinker Gorshak any part of his family, pulled stiffly back. Gorshak went on, "What's the use of him getting mixed up with the people that are sucking our blood? I think he should tell this girl to take her invitation and stuff it."

"Tinker. It isn't going to hurt him to see how the other half lives," Gertrud said, "if he wants to go. What about it, Dekker? Yes? All right, then what about a present?"

Another surprise. Dekker was puzzled. "A present?"

"That's right, a present. Earthies are always giving each other things. You can't go to a party without bringing something along to give your hostess."

"But I don't have anything to give away," Dekker protested, and Tinker Gorshak said sourly:

"Who does? But that doesn't stop the mudsuckers from always wanting something anyway." He thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, if you're sure you want to do this— Tell you what, Dek. Let me make a couple of calls and see what I can do for you."

9.

A good-sized comet can mass as much as a hundred billion tons, and in the richest of them as much as four-fifths of that mass may be water—well, ice, which is the same thing.

Water's the first thing you want to grow crops. Old Earthie farmers used to calculate that it took about seven million tons of irrigation water to lay one inch (in modern measures, two and a half centimeters) of water on a hundred square miles ("miles"!) of farmland. The other figure to remember is that you need about ten "inches" a year to make most crops grow, even with trickle irrigation.

What that adds up to is that you could wet down nearly a million and a half square miles with one decent-sized comet—sort of.

In practice it's harder than that. You can make those sums work only if you could keep the water contained in one place. (Which you can't.) And also if most of it didn't get blasted right back into space by the impact. (Which it does.) And if that was all you wanted . . . .

But of course the Martians wanted much more than that. They wanted water to keep, and air besides. So they needed a *lot* of comets, because what they wanted was to make the whole old planet bloom.

What a lucky thing it was for all of them that the Oort had literally trillions of the things.

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10.

When Dekker DeWoe, gift in one sweaty hand, turned up at the home of the Cauchys the first thing that surprised him was the walls.

Dekker knew what walls were supposed to be like. All the walls in Sunpoint City, as in every Martian settlement, were made out of the same material. It looked like poured concrete but, since there certainly wasn't enough spare water on Mars to waste on such water-intensive processes, it certainly wasn't. What the walls were made of was the cheapest and most convenient material available on Mars. That was simply rock. It was cheap and easy to deal with—as long as you had plenty of solar heat. You just dug up some of the bare rock that lay all around the surface, and then you crushed it, pressed it and heated it until it sintered into flat construction panels.

Of course, most people did what they could to decorate those monotonous walls. They painted them at least—"crayoned" them might have been a better word, because the pigment was in waxy sticks which you just rubbed on. Or they hung pictures on them when they had any pictures to hang. Or they lined the walls with shelves and cupboards, which was usually necessary anyway, space being as scarce as it was.

But that was about as far as any Martian could afford to go, and Dekker had never before seen walls hung with draperies. Not just any old kind of spun-rock draperies, either. These were *fabric* draperies—organic fabrics, probably even real cotton and silk and wool, natural-fiber textiles that had to have been shipped all the way from Earth.

His consolation was that at least he had a worthy gift for his hosts, for Tinker Gorshak had come through for him. The old man disapproved of Dekker's socializing with the Earthies, but all the same he had postponed his own dinner long enough to escort Dekker down to the Sunpoint hothouse, and there he had wheedled an actual rosebud from his colleague, the amiable Mr. Chandy. When Dekker entered the Earthies' apartment (not just one room! There had to be more than that, since there were no beds in this one, although it was easily three times the size of the one he shared with his mother) his eyes were popping as he held his flower before him like an ambassador's credentials, staring at everything around.

It wasn't just the drapes on the walls, it was everything. Even the lights. There wasn't any one-dim-bulb rule here; the room was flooded with brilliant light. He hadn't seen people dressed like these, either—filmy, silky drapes on the women, puffed shirts and ruffled shorts on the men, nothing that would keep you warm or fit under a hotsuit. Nor had he ever seen a table longer than he was, and every square centimeter of it covered with *food*. Dishes of spicy little balls of hot meat. Fresh raw celery. Carrots slivered into pencil-thin strips (they must be on even better terms with the hothouse geneticist than Tinker Gorshak). Bowls of yellow or pink or green pastes to dip the vegetables in. "So glad you could come, Dekker," said the tall, yellow-haired Earthie woman

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who let him in. "Oh, a rose! How kind of you," she finished, sniffing it and offering it to her daughter. "Look, Annetta, Dekker has brought us a rose."

"I'll put it with the others," the girl told her mother, and took Dekker's arm. "Come on, Dekker, let's hit the chowline. You must be starving."

It was annoying to Dekker that this girl should always assume he was hungry. It was even more annoying, in fact embarrassing, when he saw that on the buffet table there were half a dozen vases of flowers, all kinds of flowers, and when Annetta thrust his lone contribution into one of the vases he could hardly find it again.

But the fact was that as soon as she handed him a plate he found that she had been right. He really was hungry, his salivary glands flowing at the smells and sights of all that remarkable food. And Annetta was devoting herself to him. "Some lobster, Dekker? You've never *had* lobster? Well, these are only irradiated, you can't get live ones here, of course, but still—And try the guacamole! My mother made it herself, grew her own avocados in the aeroponics."

The stuff called "guacamole" looked too much like the algae paste the cooks added to soups and stews, and Dekker certainly wasn't going to touch the funny-looking red-shelled stuff Annetta said was lobster. But there was plenty of other food to choose from. He let her guide him to the salads, and the poultry legs in barbecue sauce, but when he took a good look at the display behind the table he stopped short. Across the top of the wall was a banner that read *Cauchy, Sternglass celebrates the triumph of ecopoiesis,* and under it a row of pictures, the fake-3D kind that almost looked as though they had depth: A grove of fruit trees in blossom, some people with long sticks strapped to their feet and sliding down a snow-white slope, laughing nude men and women, all young, all beautiful—all distinctly *Earthie* in their proportions—diving and swimming at the edge of an immense blue lake. The startling thing was that they all looked somehow oddly almost familiar, though of course he had never seen anything like that in the flesh. "Is that Earth?" he asked.

She was laughing at him. "Silly. That's *Mars.* The way it's going to be. Don't you recognize Olympus Mons, for heaven's sake? They're what they call renderings—Daddy's company uses them when they underwrite a new issue."

"Issue?" Dekker said, and then realized. "Oh. The Bonds."

"Of course The Bonds. Have you got everything you want? For starters, I mean? Then come on, I'd like you to meet some people."

It was not exactly what Dekker would have liked, but he was determined to be a good guest. Annetta herself was not now the girl in the plain brown hotsuit he'd met out on the slope. Somehow she had grown up overnight. She was dressed in white, and what she was wearing was not shorts or even pants but a *skirt,* ankle length, filmy as her mother's. She wore a necklace of sparkling stones, with a large red one that lay close above her very nearly significant young breasts, and her pale hair was upswept with something like gold dust sprinkled on it.

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Dekker was dazzled—by the food, by the surroundings, by the girl, maybe most of all by the company. *All* these people were dressed like characters in a video play. All of them were Earthies, too—or almost all. He did recognize one elderly Martian couple as high-ups in the Sunpoint City administration. They were painfully on their best behavior, treated with elaborate courtesy, but no real concern, by the Earthies whose party it really was. Dekker saw with some scorn that a large American "flag" was standing on a pole in one corner of the room, but they weren't all Americans.

As he was introduced, catching none of the names, he discovered that there was a German couple, and some Japanese and a handful of Brazilians. Some he couldn't identify at all. Altogether there were twenty or thirty people in the room, probably the whole Earthie population of Sunpoint City, Dekker thought.

What there were not very many of were children. Dekker was pretty sure he was the youngest person present.

Annetta, he supposed, was not much older, and there was another Earthie girl and a boy a little older still; no one else under full adult age. Annetta introduced him all around. That was an ordeal in itself, because he had a plate of food and his mouth usually full, and hardly any of the names stayed with him long enough even to say hello. Still, he did get the names of the other kids—Evan, shorter than he but with a glass of wine in his hand; Ina, with more makeup on her face than even Annetta. He remembered that Evan was the one he had met in the entry lock, and noticed that Evan and Ina were holding hands, and that when Annetta saw them doing it she bit her lip.

"How old are you, Dekker?" the boy asked, looking him up and down with amusement.

"Seven," said Dekker shortly, looking down at the boy. Evan was barrel-shaped; Dekker thought he looked as though he could break Dekker in half—what a strange notion, Dekker told himself reprovingly; just a few minutes with these mudsuckers and he was forgetting all about his non-violence classes.

"But that's almost thirteen, Earth years," Annetta put in quickly.

"Oh, really?" said Evan, pursing his lips. "Then I suppose you're old enough to have a glass of wine with us?"

Dekker knew what wine was, had even had a sip of his mother's now and then. "Of course I am," he declared. "We drink alcohol often." And then was stuck with this incredibly fragile-feeling crystal glass with this sour-tasting liquid in it. He swallowed it down anyway and managed to say, "Good wine," appreciatively.

"It's really a pity," Annetta was saying warmly to him, "that we won't be seeing each other much, Dekker. We're going home, you know, as soon as we see the comet impact is going all right."

"To Earth," supplied Evan, grinning as he refilled Dekker's glass. "You've never been there, I suppose? No, of course not. You really

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should—if you ever can, I mean. Paris, Rome, San Francisco, Rio—Earth is just wonderful, Dekker. The scenery! The culture! The women! Here, let me fresh your drink up a little."

"I think Dekker would rather have a soft drink," Annetta said worriedly.

"Why do you think that?" Dekker demanded. "No, I like to drink this wine very much." And in fact he discovered that he did—not for the taste, of course, because who could enjoy swallowing weak vinegar? But it did warm him up in pleasant ways.

It wasn't just the wine, either. People more mature than Dekker DeWoe found intoxication in moving in the society of their betters. It was fascinating to Dekker to watch the Earthies dealing with each other—always smiling, but always, he thought, serious and even, what would you call it? yes, *punishing* behind the smiles. And what things they said! He caught bits and pieces of phrases and discussions, no more comprehensible to him than ancient Etruscan: What were "double-dip securities"? Or "self-licky debentures"? Or "offplanet taxfrees"? And always there was Annetta, worriedly keeping an eye on him as Evan, grinning sardonically, kept refilling Dekker's glass, making conversation, always patronizing. "Pity you've never been in a spaceship; it's so broadening. Three weeks en route, with the whole universe spread out before your eyes—"

"I bet," Dekker said belligerently, swallowing a sip of the stuff, "you've never been in a dirigible."

"A what?" the Earthie asked tolerantly, one eyebrow raised.

"A dirigible. We use them all the time—for mass lifting, you know. They're hot-air. You cruise over the Valles Marineris for the mines, say, and you're looking right down into the crevasses—"

Annetta appeared from nowhere. "Here, let me take that for you," she said, tugging the glass from his hand with a glare at Evan. "Dirigible, you say? That sounds really fun, Dekker."

"It is," Dekker affirmed, and went on describing the raptures of lighter-than-air flight on Mars—well, not really out of his own *personal* experience, of course, but they didn't have to know that; he'd seen it often enough in the virtuals, and it had been just as his mother had described it to him.

"So you have virts," the girl, Ina, said. "Virtuals," she added helpfully, when he looked surprised.

He blinked at her. She seemed a nice enough girl, short and squat, but too nice for that snot, Evan. "Did I say anything about virtuals?" he asked, trying to remember.

"Of course they have virtuals, Ina," Evan said, his hand on her shoulder. "Only sight and sound, of course. On Earth," he informed Dekker, "we have full sensory. Of course—" an unexpected wink and poke in Dekker's ribs—"they're not very convincing unless you dope up a little first."

"Dope up? You mean like this wine stuff?"

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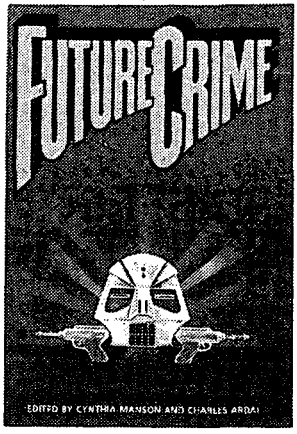

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Evan laughed. "Oh, a lot better than that. I mean serious dope."

"Oh," said Dekker. "I know. I saw it in the plays, but it's against the law."

"Of course it's against the law, but why should you let that stop you?"

Dekker took a sip of wine, to think over what it meant to deliberately break laws. That struck him as preposterous. What were laws for, if they were broken?

But the Earth boy was still pressing him. As he refilled Dekker's glass he said, "What about games?"

"Well, of course we have games. All kinds of games. Prospecting's good, and there's Blowout, and Building—"

"I mean *competitive* games. War games. Crime games."

"I don't think I've ever seen anything like that," Dekker confessed.

"I didn't think you would have," Evan said comfortably, stroking Ina's back in a leisurely, self-confident way. "What do you do? I mean your father."

"Photovoltaic engineer," Dekker said, omitting the verbs in order to avoid bringing up the subject of whether his father was still with him.

"I see. Mine's an underwriter. Do you know what that is?"

"The Bonds," Dekker said, knowing that it had something to do with them.

"Yes, exactly. We're the ones who get your bonds sold, to raise the money you need. That means that we're the people who did all this for you—the comets and everything. Without us, this whole planet would have been a permanent waste of time. But," he added benignly, "we're glad to help out. You don't have to thank us. Have some more wine."

The thing about wine was that it made you feel nice and warm and rather cheerful, although it also seemed to make you feel as though your skin were tightening up on your face, and the floor didn't seem as solid as it ought. Dekker decided, though, that he was conducting himself rather well. Evan had finally left him alone—Dekker saw him off in a corner with Annetta Cauchy, looking tolerant as the girl scolded him about something—and Dekker just wandered about, talking to whoever seemed to want to talk to him. Not everyone did. Some of the people, especially one of the sallow-skinned women with the straight, jet-black hair, didn't seem to understand him very well; and when she spoke to him he was startled to find that he was being addressed in some other language.

But others were quite nice. Annetta's mother, for instance. He didn't quite understand the worried look in her eyes as she spoke to him, but when she asked him about his home he was glad to tell her all about Sagdayev Deme.

He described the landscape, and the rooms, and the copper mine; he told her how they concentrated solar heat so that the molten copper flowed out of the ore, and how the oxygen that had bound it was usefully added to the deme's supply. He was going on to explain some of the

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differences between Sagdayev and Sunpoint City when he discovered that she was no longer listening.

That surprised him, because he didn't remember her turning away. Nor did he remember how he came to have a filled glass in his hand again, but he cheerfully lifted it to his lips. It was astonishing how the taste had improved.

He was, he felt confident, holding his own in this strange party, where people kept trying to impress other people rather than make them feel partyishly happy.

The most striking thing was the established pecking order: the richest deferred to by the not quite as rich, and the one Martian couple among the guests condescended to by all. That bothered Dekker. Yet even the Martians were smiling as though they were enjoying all this opulence and laughter.

And the blocky young Earthie, Evan, kept refilling Dekker's glass, and everything around him seemed even brighter and more beautiful and exciting . . . right up to the time he felt himself being picked up and carried.

"Where'd you come from?" he croaked, twisting around to stare into the face of Tinker Gorshak.

"Came to get you, you idiot," Gorshak snarled. "I knew you'd make a fool of yourself. Shut up. What you need is a good night's sleep."

11.

No matter how badly you want water and air, there are limits. You certainly don't want a hundred billion tons of anything crashing into your planet in one lump. That would cloud your skies with more dust than even Mars has seen for a very long time, not to mention shaking up everything around.

So you have to take some precautions. Before your approaching comet gets that far you rig demolition charges in its core, carefully placed to shatter it into the tiniest pieces you can manage. (They won't be all that tiny, anyway, but still.) Most of them will burn up or at least volatilize from air friction—yes, even Mars's thin air is enough to do that—and the seismic impacts of the residues as they strike will be, you hope, tolerable.

You don't want them crashing into the surface at an excessively high velocity, either. What you do about that is to navigate your comet to come up on the planet from behind, so that both are going in the same orbital direction around the sun and the combined speeds are minimized. Then, at that last moment, you fire the deceleration jets from the Augenstein drives you have forethoughtfully already installed in the comet in order to slow it still more—so that your impact velocity isn't much more than, oh, one or two kilometers a second, total. Then you cross your fingers and hope.

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12.

Dekker didn't get a good night's sleep, though, or at least not as much of it as he really wanted, because only minutes later, it seemed, his mother was shaking him awake. "Are you all right, Dekker?" she was asking anxiously. "I didn't think you'd want to miss seeing the impact."

He fended her off, wincing. Someone was pounding nails into his head. Tinker Gorshak was standing over him with a cup of something hot. "Strong tea," Gorshak muttered. "Go ahead, drink it. You'll be all right in a while, hangovers never kill anybody."

And, actually, after a few scalding gulps and an eternity of throbbing temples, it began to seem that Tinker Gorshak was right. When the pounding began to subside Dekker bundled up in a robe before the news screen and watched what was happening. The time was impact minus thirty minutes, and on the screen he could see the comet's drive jets detaching themselves and hurling themselves away, bright and tiny shooting stars, far above, to be captured and salvaged by the workers in the tender spacecraft. There weren't any burns after that.

Dekker sipped his tea and began to feel almost human again—human enough to begin replaying the scenes of the party in his mind. "You know," he announced, astonished at his discovery, "She didn't really like me. She only invited me to make that other guy jealous."

"Earthies," Gorshak grumbled, looking at his watch. "In about two minutes now—"

"I don't think they even like each other," Dekker went on, thinking it through. "Evan was always making jokes about the Japanese and the Brazilians, and they were mean kinds of jokes, too."

"Of course they don't like each other. Don't you know yet what Earthies are like? They used to have *wars*," Gorshak informed him. "They probably still would, except nobody dares any more. Now they just try to take each other's money."

"Oh, yes, the money," Dekker said, remembering. "What's an 'underwriter,' Tinker?"

"An underwriter! An underwriter is somebody who sucks your blood, and wants you to thank him for it."

"Tinker," his mother said gently. "Dek, it's how they do things on Earth. We borrow money by selling bonds—you know what The Bonds are. But we don't sell them directly to the people who want to invest in them, that would take too long and, anyway, we don't really know how to do that sort of thing. So somebody 'underwrites' the bonds. He buys the whole lot from us, and then he sells them, a few at a time, to the people who really want them."

"Stealing part of the money along the way," said Tinker Gorshak.

"It isn't stealing. There's no law against it, and besides we agreed to it. If the bond is supposed to sell for, say, a hundred of their dollars, then the underwriter gives us, say, ninety. So every time he sells one he makes a ten dollar profit."

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Dekker puzzled that over for only a moment before he saw the flaw. "But what if he can't find anyone to buy it?"

"Then," said Tinker, "he has our bonds at a bargain rate. But don't worry about that, Dek. They'll always find somebody to buy. Any way they can."

The boy nodded, thinking about the glamorized pictures on the Cauchys' wall, deciding not to mention them to Tinker. He thought of something else. "Ina said— Ina was saying something to Annetta. It was really quite unpleasant, about 'unloading' their bonds if the comet impact was successful—"

"*If* it was successful!" Gorshak said indignantly. "What a way to talk! And *if* it's successful, then you know what will happen. We're going to be swamped by immigrants from Earth."

"We're *all* immigrants from Earth," Gerti DeWoe reminded him, "or our parents were."

"But our roots are here! It isn't just *money* with us. It's *freedom*."

Dekker refused to be distracted into that familiar argument. "But what did they mean about unloading?"

"It's just what they do," Dekker's mother said indulgently. "Buy on bad news, sell on good. She was talking about the bonds they issued to raise the money for the project, that's all. I suppose they're looking for a good way to realize a profit on them so they can invest in something else."

"But Annetta got really angry," Dekker said. "Then Evan gave me some more wine—"

"Never mind, Dekker. Look! There it goes!"

And on the news screen they saw the sequenced charges inside the comet doing their job. A lump flaked off one side of it, then another. Then the main mass split in two. Then the demolition charges in each section blew up, all at once, and the comet became a mass of rubble, all falling together toward Chryse Planitia. The scene shifted swiftly to a quick shot from the surface cameras atop Sunpoint City. The mass of the comet was now visible to the naked eye, moving perceptibly down and to the east. The comet didn't have a tail any more. Rather, they were *inside* the tail; all they could see was a general unnatural brightness of the sky.

"I hope it works," Gertrud DeWoe said prayerfully.

Tinker Gorshak grunted. "I hope we can pay for it," he grumbled. "Those bloodsuckers from Earth are charging us plenty for the capital. Do you know what it costs, Dekker? I'm not talking about the whole project. I'm just talking right now about that party you went to—who do you think is paying for it? And all they're doing is watching to see it fall—at a thousand dollars a day apiece, and we have to pay—"

"Look!" cried Dekker's mother.

Because—back to the cameras in orbit—all those myriad chunks of rubble turned dazzlingly bright at once as they struck the Martian atmosphere. It was very thin, of course, but it extended far above the surface,

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and the heat of friction produced a thousand blinding meteors. Switch again, this time to the remote ground-based cameras in their dugouts on the slope of Olympus Mons. . . .

And the fragments hit.

They were not tiny. The biggest was more than a hundred million tons. Even some of the smaller ones were the size of a skyscraper. When they struck they made H-bomb-sized fountains of cloud, red-lit and white-lit and yellow, with all that kinetic energy transformed at once into impact heat.

The people in Sunpoint City never did feel the shudder of that impact. They were too far away; but the needles of their seismographs jumped right off the tapes.

And when Gerti DeWoe tucked her son into bed at last he said drowsily, "I guess we won't see any difference right away?"

His mother didn't laugh at him. She just shook her head. "Not right away, no. It'll be years before Mars has any decent atmosphere. And then we won't be able to breathe it directly, you know. There'll be too much carbon dioxide, not enough free oxygen, not much nitrogen at all. We'll have to find the nitrogen somewhere else. And then we'll need to seed the blue-green algae, and some kind of lichens, to start photosynthesis going so we'll have free oxygen, and then— But, oh, Dekker," she said, looking more excited and younger than he had ever seen her, "what it's going to mean to us! Can you imagine crops growing under the naked *sky?* And the climate getting really *warm?*"

"Like Earth," he said bitterly.

"*Better* than Earth! There aren't as many of us, and we get along better!"

"I know," said Dekker, because he did know. Everyone on Mars had been told over and over why they needed to borrow all that money to get all those comets—water for the crops, water to make oxygen for animals and themselves. *Lakes*. Maybe even *rain*. The warming greenhouse effect that the water vapor would provide. The kinetic energy of each cometary impact transformed to heat, doing its part to warm the planet up.

He asked, "Do you think we'll live to see it?"

His mother hesitated. "Well, no, Dekker. At least I won't, or at least not to see the best part of it, because it'll be a lot of years. But maybe you will, or your children, or your children's children. . . ."

"Hell," said Dekker, disappointed. "I don't want to wait that long!"

"Well, then," his mother said, grinning fondly, "then when you grow up you'd better get out there and help, and make it happen faster!"

And the funny thing was that, when he did grow up, he did. ●

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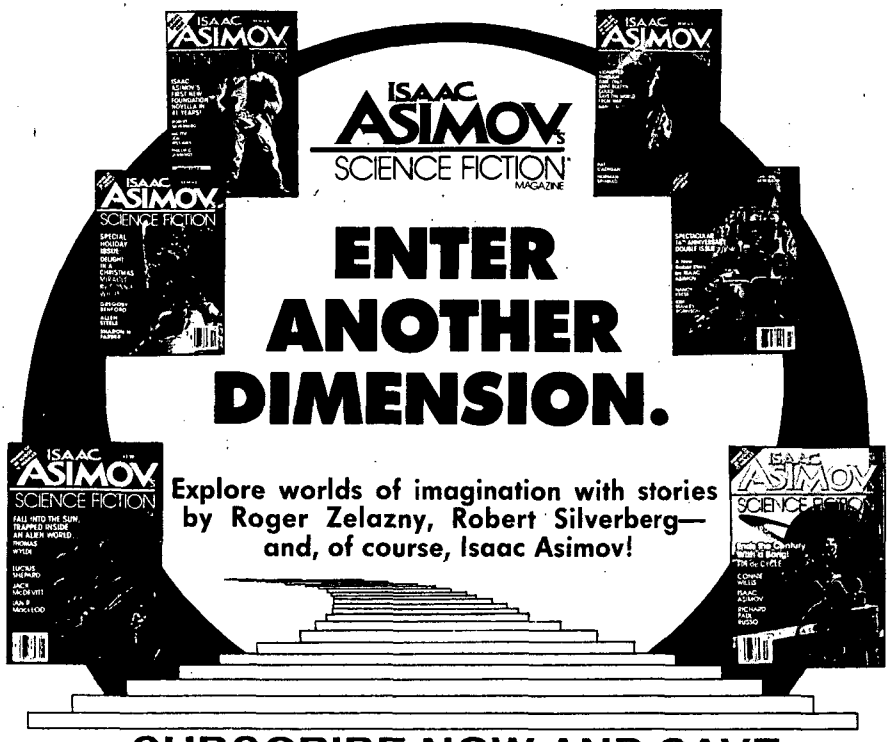
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THE BEAST

by Maureen McHugh

Maureen McHugh tells us that a lot of the details in "The Beast" are true. The yellow church dress was hers, and the gymnasium at the Catholic school is real, but the story itself is not autobiographical. It was inspired by a dream and a song.

I was thirteen, and it was spring. It was the barren time in March when you cannot be sure if it really is warmer, but you are so desperate for change that you tell yourself that the mud at the edge of the sidewalk is different than winter mud, and you are certain that the wet soil has a bit of the scent of summer rain, of grass and drowned earthworms. And it has, because something is stirring.

I was wearing a yellow linen dress and carrying a white church hat. My mother had picked out the dress, and it flattered me, but being thirteen, I disliked it. I had white church shoes which I concentrated on keeping out of the mud, walking down the sidewalk on my toes. My father and I were going to Mass. My mother did not go, she was Protestant. Stepping around the wettest places, I came close to my father, and he put his hand on top of my hair, his palm flat on my head, and I could feel the bone of my skull and my skin and my hair and his hot palm, so dry and strong. When I was a little girl, he did that often, but he hadn't done it in a long time. I could not help arching my back a little. I wanted to push against his hand like a cat, but the instinct that comes with being thirteen, the half-understood caution that makes a girl either timid or wild, the slyness, told me to just walk. I wanted to feel the rough edge of his coat pocket against my cheek, but I was too tall. I wanted to be seven again, and be safe. I wanted to put my white hat on my head.

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And I still wanted to push against his hand, or at least reach in his pocket and steal his leather glove, that secret animal.

Instead we went into church, and I took a Bulletin, dipped my finger in Holy Water, and genuflected. The inside of the church was damp, but it smelled like wood and furniture polish, not alive at all. My father took off his coat and draped it over the edge of the pew, and when I came back from communion I stole his glove. The paper taste of the wafer was still in my mouth, and I took a deep breath of the leather. It smelled like March. In my pocket, it squirmed against my palm. He wouldn't notice that it was gone, it was too warm for gloves.

We walked back through the school, taking the back door because it was drizzling. We crossed the gym, my tall father in his navy suit and me with my shoes going click on the wood. Then underneath the dark bleachers to the side door—we stood there, waiting for the rain to stop.

My father was thirty-five. He stood rocked back on his heels with his coat thrown over his shoulders and his hands in his pockets, not looking at me, not looking at anything, facing out, into the rain. I thought of bacon and eggs, toast with peach jam out of the jar. I was so hungry.

Under the bleachers was secret and dark, full of things: a metal pail, a mop, a pew with a broken kneeler, rags, the booth for selling candy at the eighth grade basketball games, and, next to the door, one of the tall black iron candle stands, the holder gone and the end jagged. On the floor was a wrapper from a French Chew. The long dark space under the bleachers stretched far away.

I heard the rain and the faint rustle of paper, and everything sounded alive. In my pocket, the soft leather glove might have sighed.

There was rustling on the concrete, and the drizzle of soft rain. Did anyone go back under the bleachers? Was anything there, maybe crickets or mice? Once I saw a bat that had flown into the big sliding glass doors at home, a tiny fox-faced thing. The rustling might have been mice. I wished the rain would stop, I wanted to go home. I took my hand out of my pocket and made noises with my heels, but they were too loud, so I stopped. Something else clicked, and I tried to see what it was, but under the bleachers was only dark. It wasn't as loud as my heels. My father cleared his throat, looking out the door.

I imagined a man down there in the dark, an escaped convict. A lunatic.

The rain was almost over. In fifteen minutes, we would be home and my mother would fry eggs.

I heard the noise like paper. My father heard it, too, but he pretended not to. There was a heavier sound, a rasp, like a box pulled over concrete. I looked at my father, but he didn't turn his head. I wished he would turn his head. There was the click again, and the rustle, and I could

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not think of what it could be. I had no explanation for that particular combination of sounds. I knew that there was one, or maybe there were two things that happened to be making noises at the same time.

Once, in a fever, I heard thousands of birds outside my window, and I was terrified that they would fling themselves through the glass and attack me, but it was only the sound of the rain on the eaves. The world was more *regular* than that; I knew even at thirteen that birds did not lurk murderously outside windows, that there was nothing under my bed but dust, and that escaped lunatics did not crouch under the bleachers at the Catholic school. My father did not turn his head and I could not think of what it might be making the sound—except suddenly there was a smell like wet dog. And I felt the glove turn in my pocket.

The clicks sounded like a dog's toenails on concrete, then there was the rustle again, then the dragging sound. Looking at my father, I said, "Is it a dog?", and he finally turned his head.

And it was there. It was tall and had an absurdly small head, a bird's head with a hard, short beak like a sparrow's, only the tip curved cruelly down. The feathers on its head were yellowed, and there were gnats in a cloud around its golden eyes. It had a furred body like some big tan animal, the fur thinning over its sharp hips; not like a horse, maybe like a lion, with a belly that swung a bit. It had feet like a bird's, except thicker and stronger; the cabled tendons darkened from gold to satiny gray, and the feet ended in thick graphite claws. Other than its golden eyes, its feet were the most beautiful thing about it. It was as tall as my father.

It stood there, one foreclaw raised, and its black bird tongue moved as it panted. Its breath smelled like wet dog. I thought it might speak. I was terrified that it would speak. I wondered if this was the end of the world, but I wasn't ready.

My father took a step back, the heel of his shoe scraping on the floor. The beast craned its head toward us, cocked it a bit. Its tongue was black, and wet as a snail. My father grabbed the broken candle stand and the beast reared up, reared up tall and screamed like a girl, a strange, terrible sound to come out of the beast's throat, and my father threw the heavy iron candle stand into its chest. The point didn't strike the beast so much as go *through* it, as if it were made of paper, and the beast folded around the candle stand the way a wet sheet on a clothesline wraps around you if you run into it, and my father grabbed me. The beast's scream still echoed in the gym.

I was held tight inside my father's coat, and he held my head and murmured, "Don't scream, it's okay. Sssh."

But I hadn't screamed. I had not made any sound at all.

Still I was afraid to look out of my father's coat, afraid the world would

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be changed. I didn't know. Even though he had stopped it, I didn't know if I could count on my father to be *enough* anymore. I didn't know if he could *always* stop it.

"It's not raining," my father said, as if everything was normal. And, when I looked, it was. There was no beast, only the wrought-iron candle stand, thrown under the bleachers. Outside, it was wet and smelled of spring. My father let go of me and adjusted his coat on his shoulders, and I felt embarrassed.

I stepped outside, careful of my white shoes. The cars were all gone from the parking lot, and the sign in front of the school said "Easter Vacation: April 4–11, Drive Carefully." A wet sparrow sat in the bushes.

I looked back at my father, still in the darkness of the doorway. His face was strange, empty. His pupils reflected red, like a cat's in the dark, and I wondered if mine did, too. I wondered at the things that got inside people's eyes. But when my father came out, he looked like himself.

I wanted to be home, eating peach jam on toast, so I forgot. My mother was waiting, and when, later, she asked my father what had happened to his glove, he didn't know.

And I did not say.●

HALF SISTERS

There are two witches who dwell in the wood,
One of them wicked and one of them good:
Black witch, white witch, what magic foretells
The end of your struggles, the strength of your spells?
Light lady, dark lady, why do you strive;
When one lives victorious, then both of you die.

There are two women who sleep in the wood,
One of them weeps and the other one should:
Cold sister, bold sister, soon you must lie
Beneath the soft earth and the star spattered sky.
Sun lover, moon lover, your year has been run,
And all of your webs now fly backward, unspun.

There were two witches who dwelt in the wood,
Both of them evil and both of them good:
But each of them, hiding one half of the whole,
Died of dividing her self from her soul.

—Ace G. Pilkington

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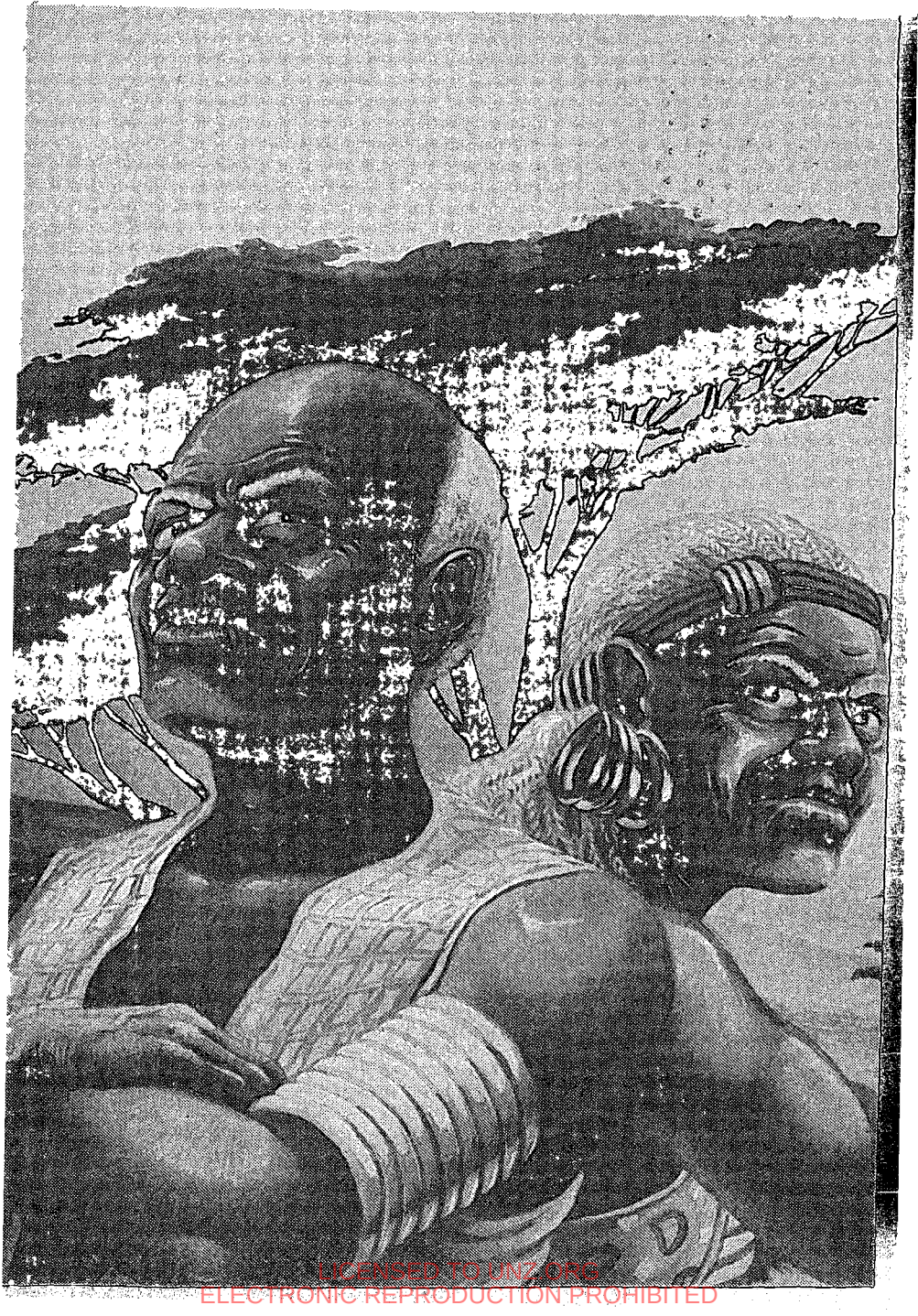

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SONG OF A DRY RIVER

by Mike Resnick

Mike Resnick recently won his second Hugo award—this time for "The Manamouki" (*IAsfm*, July 1990). His most recent books include *The Red Tape War* (co-written with Jack C. Chalker and George Alec Effinger, and published by Tor last winter), *Bwana/Bully!* (both halves of a June 1991 Tor Double), and *Soothsayer* (Ace, fall 1991).

art: Pat Morrissey

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I will tell you why Ngai is the most cunning and powerful god of all.

Eons ago, when the Europeans were evil and their god decided to punish them, he caused it to rain for forty days and forty nights and covered the earth with water—and because of this, the Europeans think that their god is more powerful than Ngai, who sits on His golden throne atop Kirinyaga, which men now call Mount Kenya.

Certainly it is no small accomplishment to cover the earth with water—but when the Kikuyu heard the story of Noah from the European missionaries, it did nothing to convince us that the god of the Europeans is more powerful than Ngai.

Ngai knows that water is the source of all life, and so when He wishes to punish us, He does not cover our lands with it. Instead He inhales deeply, and sucks the moisture from the air and the soil. Our rivers dry up, our crops fail, and our cattle and goats die of thirst.

The god of the Europeans may have created the flood—but it was Ngai who created the drought.

Can there be any doubt why He is the god that we fear and worship?

We emigrated from Kenya to the terraformed world of Kirinyaga to create a Kikuyu Utopia, a society that mirrored the simple, pastoral life we led before our culture was corrupted by the coming of the Europeans—and for the most part we have been successful.

Still, there are times when things seem to be coming apart, and it takes everything I can do in my capacity as the *mundumugu*—the witch doctor—to keep Kirinyaga functioning as it was meant to function.

On the morning of the day that I brought the curse down upon my people, my youthful assistant, Ndemi, had overslept again and once more forgot to feed my chickens. Then I had to make the long trek to a neighboring village, where in direct contradiction of my orders they had begun planting maize in an overused field which I had decreed must lay fallow until after the long rains. I explained once more that the land needed time to rest and regain its strength, but as I left I had the distinct feeling that I would be back again the next week or the next month, giving them the same lecture.

On the way home, I had to settle a dispute between Ngona, who had diverted a small stream to irrigate his fields, and Kamaki, who claimed that his crops were suffering because the stream no longer carried enough water to them. This was the eleventh time someone had tried to divert the stream, and the eleventh time I had angrily explained that the water belonged to the entire village.

Then Sabella, who was to pay me two fat, healthy goats for presiding at his son's wedding, delivered two animals that were so underfed and scrawny that they didn't even look like goats. Ordinarily I might not

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have lost my temper, but I was tired of people keeping their best animals and trying to pay me with cattle and goats that looked half-dead, so I threatened to annul the marriage unless he replaced them.

Finally, Ndemi's mother told me that he was spending too much time studying to be a *mundumugu,* and that she needed him to tend his family's cattle, this in spite of the fact that he has three strong, healthy brothers.

A number of the women stared at me in amusement as I walked through the village, as if they knew some secret of which I was ignorant, and by the time I reached the long, winding path that led to the hill where I lived, I was annoyed with *all* of my people. I craved only the solitude of my *boma,* and a gourd of *pombe* to wash away the dust of the day.

When I heard the sound of a human voice singing on my hill, I assumed that it was Ndemi, carrying out his afternoon chores. But as I approached more closely, I realized that the voice was that of a woman.

I shaded my eyes from the sun and peered ahead, and there, halfway up my hill, a wrinkled old woman was busily erecting a hut beneath an acacia tree, weaving the twigs and branches together to form the walls, and singing to herself. I blinked in surprise, for it is well known that no one else may live on the *mundumugu's* hill.

The woman saw me and smiled. "*Jambo,* Koriba," she greeted me as if nothing was amiss. "Is it not a beautiful day?"

I saw now that she was Mumbi, the mother of Koinnage, who was the paramount chief of the village.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded as I approached her.

"As you see, I am building a hut," she said. "We are going to be neighbors, Koriba."

I shook my head. "I require no neighbors," I said, pulling my blanket more tightly around my shoulders. "And you already have a hut on Koinnage's *shamba.*"

"I no longer wish to live there," said Mumbi.

"You may not live on my hill," I said. "The *mundumugu* lives alone."

"I have faced the doorway to the east," she said, turning to the broad, sprawling savannah beyond the river and ignoring my statement. "That way the rays of the sun will bring warmth into it in the morning."

"This is not even a true Kikuyu hut," I continued angrily. "A strong wind will blow it over, and it will protect you from neither the cold nor the hyenas."

"It will protect me from the sun and the rain," she responded. "Next week, when I have more strength, I will fill in the walls with mud."

"Next week you will be living with Koinnage, where you belong," I said.

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"I will not," she said adamantly. "Before I would return to Koinnage's *shamba,* I would rather you left my withered old body out for the hyenas."

That can be arranged, I thought irritably, for I had seen enough foolishness for one day. But aloud I said: "Why do you feel this way, Mumbi? Does Koinnage no longer treat you with respect?"

"He treats me with respect," she admitted, trying to straighten her ancient body and placing a gnarled hand to the small of her back.

"Koinnage has three wives," I continued, slapping futilely at a pair of flies that circled my face. "If any of them have ignored you or treated you with disrespect, I will speak to them."

She snorted contemptuously. "Ha!"

I paused and stared at a small herd of impala grazing on the savannah, trying to decide upon the best way to approach the subject. "Have you fought with them?"

"I did not realize that the mornings were so cold on this hill," she said, rubbing her wrinkled chin with a gnarled hand. "I will need more blankets."

"You did not answer my question," I said.

"And firewood," she continued. "I will have to gather much firewood."

"I have heard enough," I said firmly. "You must return to your home, Mumbi."

"I will not!" she said, laying a protective hand on the walls of her hut. "*This* will be my home."

"This is the *mundumugu's* hill. I will not permit you to live here."

"I am tired of people telling me what I am not permitted to do," she said. Suddenly she pointed to a fish eagle that was lazily riding the thermals over the river. "Why should I not be as free as that bird? I will live here on this hill."

"Who else has told you what you cannot do?" I asked.

"It is not important."

"It must be important," I said, "or you would not be here."

She stared at me for a moment, then shrugged. "Wambu has said I may not help her cook the meals, and Kibo no longer lets me grind the maize or brew the *pombe.*" She glared at me defiantly. "I am the mother of the paramount chief of the village! I will not be treated like a helpless baby."

"They are treating you as a respected elder," I explained. "You no longer have to work. You have raised your family, and now you have reached the point where they will care for you."

"I do not *want* to be cared for!" she snapped. "All my life I have run my *shamba,* and I have run it well. I am not ready to stop."

"Did not your own mother stop when her husband died and she moved

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into her son's *shamba?"* I asked, slapping at my cheek as one of the flies finally settled on it.

"My mother no longer had the strength to run her *shamba,"* said Mumbi defensively. "That is not the case with me."

"If you do not step aside, how are Koinnage's wives ever to learn to run his *shamba?"*

"I will teach them," replied Mumbi. "They still have much to learn. Wambu does not cook the banana mash as well as I do, and as for Kibo, well . . ." She shrugged her shoulders, to indicate that Koinnage's youngest wife was beyond redemption.

"But Wambu is the mother of three sons and is soon to become a grandmother herself," I noted. "If she is not ready to run her husband's *shamba* by now, then she never will be."

A satisfied smile crossed Mumbi's leathery face. "So you agree with me."

"You misunderstand me," I said. "There comes a time when the old must make way for the young."

"*You* have not made way for anyone," she said accusingly.

"I am the *mundumugu,"* I answered. "It is not my physical strength that I offer to the village, but my wisdom, and wisdom is the province of age."

"And I offer *my* wisdom to my son's wives," she said stubbornly.

"It is not the same thing," I said.

"It is precisely the same thing," she replied. "When we still lived in Kenya, I fought for Kirinyaga's charter as fiercely as you yourself did, Koriba. I came here in the same spaceship that brought you, and I helped clear the land and plant the fields. It is not fair that I should be cast aside now, just because I am old."

"You are not being cast aside," I explained patiently. "You came here to live the traditional life of the Kikuyu, and it is our tradition to care for our elders. You shall never want for food, or for a roof over your head, or for care when you are sick."

"But I don't *feel* like an elder!" she protested. She pointed to her loom and her pots, which she had brought up the hill from the village. "I can still weave cloth and repair thatch and cook meals. I am not too old to grind the maize and carry the water calabashes. If I am no longer permitted to do these things for my family, than I shall live here on this hill and do them for myself."

"That is unacceptable," I said. "You must return to your home."

"It is not *mine* any more," she replied bitterly. "It is Wambu's."

I looked down at her stooped, wrinkled body. "It is the order of things that the old shall make way for the young," I said once again.

"Who will *you* make way for?" she asked bitterly.

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"I am training young Ndemi to become the next *mundumugu,*" I said. "When he is ready, I shall step aside."

"Who will decide when he is ready?"

"I will."

"Then *I* should decide when Wambu is ready to run my son's *shamba.*"

"What you should do is listen to your *mundumugu,*" I said. "Your shoulders are stooped and your back is bent from the burden of your years. The time has come to let your son's wives care for you."

Her jaw jutted out pugnaciously. "I will not let Wambu cook for me. I have always cooked for myself, ever since we lived beside the dry river in Kenya." She paused again. "I was very happy then," she added bitterly.

"Perhaps you must learn how to be happy again," I answered. "You have earned the right to rest, and to let others work for you. This should make you happy."

"But it doesn't."

"That is because you have lost sight of our purpose," I said. "We left Kenya and came to Kirinyaga because we wished to retain our customs and traditions. If I permit you to ignore them, then I must let everyone ignore them, and then we will no longer be a Kikuyu Utopia, but merely a second Kenya."

"You told us that in a Utopia, everyone is happy," she said. "Well, *I* am not happy, so something must be wrong with Kirinyaga."

"And running Koinnage's *shamba* will make it right?" I asked.

"Yes."

"But then Wambu and Kibo will be unhappy."

"Then perhaps there are no Utopias, and we must each be concerned with our own happiness," said Mumbi.

Why are old people so selfish and unfeeling? I wondered. *Here I am, hot and thirsty and tired, and all she can do is complain about how unhappy she is.*

"Come with me," I said. "We will go to the village together, and we will find a solution to your problem. You may not remain here."

She stared at me for a very long moment, then shrugged. "I will come with you, but we will not find a solution, and then I will return here to my new home."

The sun was low in the sky as we climbed down the hill and began walking along the winding path, and twilight had fallen by the time we reached the village and began walking by the various huts. A number of men and women had gathered at Koinnage's *shamba,* and most of them displayed the same amused expressions I had seen earlier in the day. As I approached Koinnage's *boma,* they followed me, eager to see what punishment I would mete out to Mumbi, as if her transgression and my anger were the highlight of their evening's entertainment.

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"Koinnage!" I said in a loud, firm voice.

There was no response, and I called his name twice more before he finally emerged from his hut, a sheepish expression on his face.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," he said uneasily. "I did not know you were here."

I glared at him. "Did you also not know your mother was here?"

"This is her *shamba*: where else would she be?" he asked innocently.

"You know very well where she was," I said, as the light of the evening fires cast flickering shadows on his face. "I advise you to think very carefully of the consequences before you lie to your *mundumugu* again."

He seemed to shrink into himself for a moment. Then he noticed all the villagers behind me.

"What are *they* doing here?" he demanded. "Return to your *bomas,* all of you!"

They backed away a few steps, but did not leave.

Koinnage turned to Mumbi. "See how you shame me in front of my people? Why do you do this to me? Am I not the paramount chief?"

"I would think that the paramount chief could control his mother," I said sarcastically.

"I have tried," said Koinnage. "I do not know what has gotten into her." He glared at Mumbi. "I order you once again to return to your hut."

"No," said Mumbi.

"But I am the chief!" he insisted, half furiously, half whining. "You must obey me."

Mumbi stared defiantly at him. "No," she said again.

He turned back to me. "You see how it is," he said helplessly. "*You* are the *mundumugu; you* must order her to stay here."

"No one tells the *mundumugu* what he *must* do," I said severely, for I already knew what Mumbi's response to my order would be. "Summon your wives."

He seemed relieved to be sent away, however briefly, and he went off to the cooking hut, returning a moment later with Wambu, Sumi and Kibo.

"You all know that a problem exists," I said. "Mumbi is so unhappy that she wishes to leave your *shamba* and live on my hill."

"It is a good idea," said Kibo. "It is too crowded here."

"It is a bad idea," I replied firmly. "She must live with her family."

"No one is stopping her," said Kibo petulantly.

"She wants to take a more active part in the daily life of the *shamba,*" I continued. "Surely there is something she can do, so that the harmony of your *shamba* is preserved."

For a long moment no one spoke. Then Wambu, who is Koinnage's senior wife, stepped forward.

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"I am sorry you are so unhappy, my mother," she said. "You may of course brew the *pombe* and weave the cloth."

"Those are *my* jobs!" protested Kibo.

"We must show respect for our husband's mother," said Wambu with a smug smile.

"Why do we not show her even more respect and let her supervise the cooking?" said Kibo.

"I am Koinnage's senior wife," said Wambu firmly. "*I* do the cooking."

"And *I* brew the *pombe* and weave the cloth," said Kibo stubbornly.

"And *I* pound the grain and fetch the water," added Sumi. "You must find something else for her to do."

Mumbi turned to me. "I told you that it wouldn't work, Koriba," she said. "I will gather the rest of my possessions and move into my new home."

"You will not," I said. "You will remain with your family, as mothers have always remained with their families."

"I am not ready to be cast aside as my grandchildren cast aside their toys," she replied.

"And *I* am not ready to allow you to break with the traditions of the Kikuyu," I said sternly. "You will stay here."

"I will not!" she replied, and I heard some of the villagers chuckling at this withered old lady who defied both her chief and her *mundumugu*.

"Koinnage," I said, directing him and his family inside the thorn fence of his *boma*, so that we might be further away from the onlookers, "she is your mother. Speak to her and convince her to remain here, before she forces me to take some action that you will all regret."

"Do not continue to shame me in the eyes of the village, my mother," pleaded Koinnage. "You must remain in my *shamba*."

"I will not."

"You will!" said Koinnage heatedly, as the men and women of the village crowded closer to the *boma's* entrance.

"And if I don't, what will you do to me?" she demanded, glaring at him. "Will you bind my hands and feet and force me to remain here in my hut?"

"I am the paramount chief," said Koinnage in obvious frustration. "I order you to stay here!"

"Hah!" she said, and now the people's chuckles became outright laughter. "You may be a chief, but you are still my son, and mothers do not take orders from their sons."

"But everyone must obey the *mundumugu*," he said, "and Koriba has ordered you to remain here."

"*I* will not obey him," she said. "I came to Kirinyaga to be happy, and

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I am unhappy in your *shamba*. I am going to live on the hill, and neither you nor Koriba will stop me."

Suddenly the laughter stopped, and was replaced by an awed silence, for no one may flaunt the *mundumugu's* authority in such a manner. Under other circumstances I might have forgiven her, for she was very upset, but she had challenged me in front of the entire village, and it was the end of a long, irritating day.

My anger must have been reflected on my face, for Koinnage suddenly stepped between his mother and myself.

"Please, Koriba," he said, his voice unsteady. "She is an old woman, and she does not know what she is saying."

"I know what I am saying," said Mumbi. She glared at me defiantly. "If I cannot live as I like, then I prefer not to live at all. What will you do to me, *mundumugu?*"

"I?" I said innocently, aware of the many eyes that were focused upon me. "I will do nothing to you. As you yourself have pointed out, I am merely an old man." I paused and stared at her, as Koinnage and his wives shrank back in fear. "You speak fondly of the dry river we lived beside when we were children—but you have forgotten what it was like to live beside it. I will help you to remember." I raised my voice, so that all could hear. "Because you have chosen to ignore our tradition, and because the others have laughed, tonight I shall sacrifice a goat and ask Ngai to visit Kirinyaga with a drought such as it has never seen before, until the world is as dry and withered as you are yourself, Mumbi. I shall ask Him not to allow a single drop of rain to fall until you return to your *shamba* and agree to remain there."

"No!" said Koinnage.

"The cattle's tongues will swell in their heads until they cannot breathe, the crops will turn to dust, and the river will run dry." I looked angrily at the faces of my people, as if daring them to laugh again, but none of them had the courage to meet my gaze.

None but Mumbi, that is. She stared thoughtfully at me, and for a moment I thought she was going to retract her statement and agree to remain with Koinnage. Then she shrugged. "I have lived by a dry river before. I can do so again." She began walking away. "I am going to my hill now."

There was a stunned silence.

"Must you do this thing, Koriba?" asked Koinnage at last.

"You heard what your mother said to me, and yet you ask me that?" I demanded.

"But she is just an old woman."

"Do you think that only warriors can bring destruction upon us?" I responded.

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"How can living on a hill destroy us?" asked Kibo.

"We are a society of laws and rules and traditions, and our survival as a people depends upon all of them being equally obeyed."

"Then you will really ask Ngai to bring a drought to Kirinyaga?" he said.

"I am tired of being doubted and contradicted by my people, who have all forgotten who we are and why we have come here," I replied irritably. "I have said I would ask Ngai to visit Kirinyaga with a drought, and I will." I spat on my hands to show my sincerity.

"How long will the drought last?"

"Until Mumbi leaves my hill and returns to her own hut on her own *shamba.*"

"She is a very stubborn old woman," said Koinnage miserably. "She could stay there forever."

"That is her choice," I answered.

"Perhaps Ngai will not listen to your supplication," said Kibo hopefully.

"He will listen," I replied harshly. "Am I not the *mundumugu?*"

When I awoke the next morning, Ndemi had already built my fire and fed my chickens. I emerged from my hut into the cold morning air, my blanket wrapped around my shoulders.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," said Ndemi.

"*Jambo,* Ndemi," I answered.

"Why has Mumbi built a hut on your hill, Koriba?" he asked.

"Because she is a stubborn old woman," I replied.

"You do not wish her to live here?"

"No."

Suddenly he grinned.

"What do you find so amusing, Ndemi?" I asked.

"She is a stubborn old woman and you are a stubborn old man," said Ndemi. "This will be very interesting."

I stared at him, but made no answer. Finally I walked into my hut and activated my computer.

"Computer," I said, "calculate an orbital change that will bring a drought to Kirinyaga."

"Working . . . done," replied the computer.

"Now transmit those changes to Maintenance and request that they enact them immediately."

"Working . . . done." There was a moment's silence. "There is a voice-and-image message incoming from Maintenance."

"Put it through," I said.

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The image of a middle-aged Oriental woman appeared on the computer's holographic screen.

"Koriba, I just received your instructions," she said. "Are you aware that such an orbital diversion will almost certainly bring a severe climatic change to Kirinyaga?"

"I am."

She frowned. "Perhaps I should word that more strongly. It will bring a *cataclysmic* change. This will precipitate a drought of major proportions."

"Have I the right to request such an orbital change or not?" I demanded.

"Yes," she answered. "According to your charter, you have the right. But . . ."

"Then please do as I ask."

"You're sure you don't want to reconsider?"

"I am sure."

She shrugged. "You're the boss."

I am glad that someone remembers that, I thought bitterly as the connection was broken and the computer screen went blank.

"She talks too much, and I don't like the song she sings, but she has always seemed like a nice woman," remarked Ndemi, staring down the hill at Mumbi's hut after I had finished instructing him in the blessing of the scarecrows. "Why did Koinnage make her leave his *shamba?"*

"Koinnage did not make her leave," I answered. "She chose to leave."

Ndemi frowned, for such behavior was beyond his experience. "What reason did she have for leaving?"

"Her reason is not important," I said. "What *is* important is that the Kikuyu live as families, and she refuses to do so."

"Is she crazy?" asked Ndemi.

"No. Just stubborn."

"If she is not crazy, then she must think she has a good reason for living on your hill," he persisted. "What is it?"

"She still wants to do the work she has always done," I replied. "It is not crazy. In fact, in a way it is admirable—but in this society it is wrong."

"She is very foolish," said Ndemi. "When I am *mundumugu*, I will do no more work than you do."

Has everyone on Kirinyaga conspired to try my patience? I wondered. Aloud I said: "I work very hard."

"You work at your magic, and you call down the rains, and you bless the fields and the cattle," conceded Ndemi. "But you never carry water, or feed your animals, or clean your hut, or tend your gardens."

"The *mundumugu* does not do such things."

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"That is why she is foolish. She could live like a *mundumugu* and have all these things done for her, and yet she chooses not to."

I shook my head. "She is foolish because she gave up everything she had to come to Kirinyaga and live the traditional life of the Kikuyu, and now she has broken with those traditions."

"You will have to punish her," said Ndemi thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"I hope the punishment is not a painful one," he continued, "for she is very much like you, and I do not think being punished will make her change her ways."

I looked down the hill at the old woman's hut and wondered if he was right.

Within a month Kirinyaga was feeling the effects of the drought. The days were long and hot and dry, and the river that ran through our village was very low.

Each morning I awoke to the sound of Mumbi singing to herself as she climbed the hill after filling her water gourd. Each afternoon I threw stones at her goats and chickens as they grazed closer and closer to my *boma,* and wondered how much longer it would be before she returned to her *shamba.* Each evening I received a message from Maintenance, asking if I wanted to make an orbital adjustment that would bring rain to my world.

From time to time Koinnage would trudge up the long, dusty path from the village and speak to Mumbi. I never eavesdropped, so I did not know the details of what they said to each other, but always it would end the same way: with Koinnage losing his temper and yelling at his mother, and with the old woman glaring at him obstinately as he walked back to the village, yelling imprecations over his shoulder.

One afternoon Shima, Ndemi's mother, came to my *boma.*

"*Jambo,* Shima," I greeted her.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," she said.

I waited patiently for her to tell me the purpose of her visit.

"Has Ndemi been a good assistant to you, Koriba?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And he learns his lessons well?"

"Very well."

"You have never questioned his loyalty?"

"I have never had cause to," I replied.

"Then why do you make his family suffer?" she asked. "Our cattle are weak, and our crops are dying. Why do you not bring the drought only to Koinnage's fields?"

"The drought will stop when Mumbi returns to her *shamba,*" I said

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firmly. "She is the one who will decide when it ends, not I. Perhaps you should speak to her."

"I did," said Shima.

"And?"

"*She* told me to speak to *you.*"

"She brought the drought to Kirinyaga," I said. "She can end it whenever she wishes."

"She is not the *mundumugu.* You are."

"I have acted to preserve our Utopia."

She smiled bitterly. "You have spent too long on your hill, *mundumugu,*" she said. "Come down to the village. Look at the animals and the crops and the children, and then tell me how you are preserving our Utopia."

She turned and walked back down the hill before I could think of an answer.

Six weeks after the drought commenced, the Council of Elders came to my *boma* as I was giving Ndemi his daily instruction.

"*Jambo,*" I greeted them. "I trust you are well?"

"We are not well, Koriba," said old Siboki, who seemed to be their spokesman.

"I am sorry to hear that," I said sincerely.

"We must talk, Koriba," continued Siboki.

"As you wish."

"We know that Mumbi is wrong," he began. "Once a woman has raised her children and seen her husband die, she must live with her son's family on his *shamba,* and allow them to care for her. It is the law, and it is foolish for her to want to live anywhere else."

"I agree," I said.

"We *all* agree," he said. "And if you must punish her to make her obey our laws, then so be it." He paused. "But you are punishing everyone, when only Mumbi has broken the law. It is not fair that we should suffer for her transgression."

"I wish things could be otherwise," I said sincerely.

"Then can you not intercede with Ngai on our behalf?" he persisted.

"I doubt that He will listen," I said. "It would be better if you spoke to Mumbi and convinced her to return to her *shamba.*"

"We have tried," said Siboki.

"Then you must try again."

"We will," he said without much hope. "But will you at least *ask* Ngai to end the drought? You are the *mundumugu;* surely He will listen to you."

"I will ask Him," I said. "But Ngai is a harsh god. He brought forth

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the drought because Mumbi broke the law; He almost certainly will not bring the rains until she is ready to once again obey the law."

"But you will ask?"

"I will ask," I answered him.

They had nothing further to say, and after an awkward silence they left. Ndemi approached me when they were too far away to hear him.

"Ngai did not call forth the drought," he said. "*You* did, by speaking to the box in your hut."

I stared at him without replying.

"And if you brought the drought," he continued, "then surely you can end it."

"Yes, I can."

"Then why do you not do so, since it has brought suffering to many people, and not just to Mumbi?"

"Listen to me carefully, Ndemi," I said, "and remember my words, for someday you shall be the *mundumugu,* and this is your most important lesson."

"I am listening," he said, squatting down and staring at me intently.

"Of all the things on Kirinyaga, of all our laws and traditions and customs, the most important is this: the *mundumugu* is the most powerful man in our society. Not because of his physical strength, for as you see I am a wrinkled old man, but because he is the interpreter of our culture. It is he who determines what is right and what is wrong, and his authority must never be questioned."

"Are you saying that I cannot ask why you will not bring the rains?" asked Ndemi, confused.

"No," I said. "I am saying that the *mundumugu* is the rock upon which the Kikuyu build their culture, and because of that, he can never show weakness." I paused. "I wish I had not threatened to bring forth the drought." It had been a long, irritating day, and I was tired, and many people had been very foolish that day—"but I *did* promise that there would be a drought, and now, if I show weakness, if I bring the rains, then sooner or later everyone in the village will challenge the *mundumugu's* authority . . . and without authority, there is no structure to our lives." I looked into his eyes. "Do you understand what I am saying to you, Ndemi?"

"I think so," he said uncertainly.

"Someday it will be you, rather than I, who speaks to the computer. You must fully understand me before that day arrives."

There came a morning, three months into the drought, that Ndemi entered my hut and woke me by touching my shoulder.

"What is it?" I asked, sitting up.

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"I cannot fill your gourds with water today," said Ndemi. "The river has dried up."

"Then we will dig a well at the foot of the hill," I said, walking out into my *boma* and wrapping my blanket around my shoulders to protect me from the dry, cold morning air.

Mumbi was singing to herself, as usual, as she lit a fire in front of her hut. I stared at her for a moment, then turned back to Ndemi.

"Soon she will leave," I said confidently.

"Will *you* leave?" he responded.

I shook my head. "This is my home."

"This is her home, too," said Ndemi.

"Her home is with Koinnage," I said irritably.

"She doesn't think so."

"She must have water to live. She will have to return to her *shamba* soon."

"Maybe," said Ndemi, without much conviction.

"Why should you think otherwise?"

"Because I passed her well as I climbed the hill," he answered. He glanced down at Mumbi, who was now cooking her morning meal. "She is a very stubborn old woman," he added with more than a touch of admiration.

I made no answer.

"Your shade tree is dying, Koriba."

I looked up and saw Mumbi standing beside my *boma*.

"If you do not water it soon, it will wither, and you will be very uncomfortable." She paused. "I have extra thatch from my roof. You may have it and spread it across the branches of your acacia, if you wish."

"Why do you offer me this, when you yourself are responsible for the drought?" I asked suspiciously.

"To show you that I am your neighbor and not your enemy," she replied.

"You disobeyed the law," I said. "That makes you the enemy of our culture."

"It is an evil law," she replied. "For more than four months I have lived here on this hill. Every day I have gathered firewood, and I have woven two new blankets, and I have cooked my meals, and I fetched the water before the river ran dry, and now I bring water from my well. Why should I be cast aside when I can do all these things?"

"You are not being cast aside, Mumbi," I said. "It is precisely because you have done these things for so many years that you are finally allowed to rest and let others do them."

"But they are all I have," she protested. "What is the use of being alive if I cannot do the things that I know how to do?"

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"The old have always been cared for by their families, as have the weak and the sick," I said. "It is our custom."

"It is a good custom," she said. "But I do not feel old." She paused. "Do you know the only time in my life I felt old? It was when I was not allowed to do anything in my own *shamba.*" She frowned. "It was not a good feeling."

"You must come to terms with your age, Mumbi," I said.

"I did that when I moved to this hill," she replied. "Now *you* must come to terms with your drought."

The news began to reach my ears during the fourth month.

Njoro had slain his cattle, and was now keeping gerunuk, which do not drink water but lick the dew off the leaves, this in spite of the fact that according to our tradition, the Kikuyu do not raise or eat wild game.

Kambela and Njogu had taken their families and emigrated back to Kenya.

Kubandu, who lived in a neighboring village, had been found hoarding water that he had gathered before the river ran dry, and his neighbors burned his hut and killed his cattle.

A brush fire had broken out in the western plains, and had destroyed eleven *shambas* before it had been stopped.

Koinnage's visits to his mother became more frequent, more noisy, and more fruitless.

Even Ndemi, who previously had agreed that the *mundumugu* could, by definition, do no wrong, again began to question the need for the drought.

"Someday you will be the *mundumugu,*" I said. "Remember all that I have taught you." I paused. "Now, if you should be confronted with the same situation, what will *you* do?"

He was silent for a moment. "I would probably let her live on the hill."

"That is contrary to our tradition."

"Perhaps," he said. "But she is living on the hill *now,* and all the Kikuyu who are not living on the hill are suffering." He paused thoughtfully. "Perhaps it is time to discard some traditions, rather than punish the whole world because one old woman chooses to ignore them."

"No!" I said heatedly. "When we lived in Kenya and the Europeans came, they convinced us to discard a tradition. And when we found out how easy it was, we discarded another, and then another, and eventually we discarded so many that we were no longer Kikuyu, but merely black Europeans." I paused and lowered my voice. "That is why we came to Kirinyaga, Ndemi—so that we could become Kikuyu once again. Have you listened to nothing I have said to you during the past two months?"

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"I have listened," replied Ndemi. "I just do not understand how living on this hill makes her less of a Kikuyu."

"You had no trouble understanding it two months ago."

"My family was not starving two months ago."

"One has nothing to do with the other," I said. "She broke the law; she must be punished."

Ndemi paused. "I have been thinking about that."

"And?"

"Are there not degrees of lawbreaking?" said Ndemi. "Surely what she did is not the same as murdering a neighbor. And if there are degrees of lawbreaking, then should there not also be degrees of punishment?"

"I will explain it once again, Ndemi," I said, "for the day will come that you take my place as the *mundumugu*, and when that day arrives, your authority must be absolute. And that means that the punishment for anyone who refuses to recognize your authority must also be absolute."

He stared at me for a long moment. "This is wrong," he said at last.

"What is?"

"You have not called down the drought because she has broken the law," he answered. "You have brought this suffering to Kirinyaga because she disobeyed *you*."

"They are one and the same thing," I said.

He sighed deeply, and furrowed his youthful brow in thought. "I am not sure of that."

That was when I knew that he would not be ready to be the *mundumugu* for a long, long time.

On the day that the drought was five months old, Koinnage made another trip to the hill, and this time there was no yelling. He stayed and spoke to Mumbi for perhaps five minutes, and then, without even looking toward me, he walked back to the village.

And twenty minutes later, Mumbi climbed up to the top of the hill and stood before the gate to my *boma*.

"I am returning to Koinnage's *shamba*," she announced.

An enormous surge of relief swept over me. "I knew that sooner or later you would see that you were wrong," I said.

"I am not returning because *I* am wrong," she said, "but because *you* are, and I cannot allow more harm to come to Kirinyaga because of it." She paused. "Kibo's milk has gone dry, and her baby is dying. My grandchildren have almost nothing left to eat." She glared at me. "You had better bring the rains today, old man."

"I will ask Ngai to bring the rains as soon as you have returned to your home," I promised her.

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"You had better do more than *ask* Him," she said. "You had better *order* Him."

"That is blasphemy."

"How will you punish me for my blasphemy?" she said. "Will you bring forth a flood and destroy even more of our world?"

"I have destroyed nothing," I said. "It was you who broke the law."

"Look out at the dry river, Koriba," she said, pointing down the hill. "Study it well, for it is Kirinyaga, barren and unchanging."

I looked down upon the river. "Its changelessness is one of its virtues," I said.

"But it is a river," she said. "All *living* things change—even the Kikuyu."

"Not on Kirinyga," I said adamantly.

"They change or they die," she continued. "I do not intend to die. You have won the battle, Koriba, but the war goes on."

Before I could answer her she turned and walked down the long, winding path to the village.

That afternoon I brought down the rains. The river filled with water, the fields turned green, the cattle and goats and the animals of the savannah slaked their thirst and renewed their strength, and the world of Kirinyaga returned to healthy, vigorous life.

But from that day forth, Njoro never again addressed me as *mzee,* the traditional term of respect the Kikuyu have always used to signify age and wisdom. Siboki built two large containers for water, each the size of a large hut, and threatened to harm anyone who came near them. Even Ndemi, who had previously absorbed everything I taught him without question, now seemed to consider and weigh each of my statements carefully before accepting them.

Kibo's baby had died, and Mumbi moved into her *boma* until Kibo regained her health, then built her own hut out in the fields of Koinnage's *shamba.* Since she was still officially living on his property, I chose to ignore it. She remained there until the next long rains, at which time she became so infirm that she finally had to move to the hut she had formerly occupied. Now that she needed the help of her family she accepted it, but Koinnage later told me that she never sang again after the day she left my hill.

As for myself, I spent many long days on my hill, watching the river flow past, clear and cool and unchanging, and wondering uneasily if I had somehow changed the course of that other, more important river through which we all must swim. ●

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Though the ancient gods are all but forgotten, it may be dangerously ill-advised to presume their whims are idle ones....

The author grew up in Chicago, spent time as a sergeant in the Marines, and went to Clarion West. He climbs mountains for fun, and works as a technical writer only when he has to. He and his wife live in Seattle.

STRAW FOR THE FIRE

by S.A. Stolnack

art: Pat Morrissey

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Bobby Jazorny was driving home one hot August evening after working late—he was day foreman at a trucking company on Chicago's West Side, and was always catching up on the paperwork he hated doing during the day—when he glanced over at an old apartment building on his left and saw flames licking out of a fourth-floor window.

Bobby wasn't a hero (though he'd served a tour in 'Nam, and considered himself as brave as the next guy); but he realized even as he jammed his old Pinto halfway up onto the curb and shoved open his door that he was probably the first person to see that fire, and he was in a position to help.

The security door at the front of the building was ajar—somebody had stuck a rolled up newspaper in the jamb to keep it from locking—and Bobby went in, taking the stairs two at a time. He pulled the fire alarm on the second floor landing, and broke open the fire extinguisher case on the fourth floor, puffing hard and surprised at how out of shape he was. For a second he panicked when he realized he didn't know, from the inside, which room it was that was on fire. The alarm clanging in his ears and his heart drumming on his breastbone made it impossible to think. Then he saw wisps of smoke curling up from under the door to number 412. He charged it, banging with his fists, shouting: "Open up! Fire!"

No one answered. He tried the doorknob, picturing his wife and daughter inside that apartment, unconscious on the floor and surrounded by flames. The door was locked. The next thing he remembered, he was inside the room and the doorframe was in splinters.

The curtains were on fire, the rug was smoldering. The back of the couch was burning. There was a bitter smell like burning plastic. There was a young woman on the couch, in her bathrobe, unconscious.

Bobby heard a noise like someone opening a beer can and turned to see a man who might have been the woman's twin brother standing calmly in the doorway to another room. He wore faded jeans and an old T-shirt, and was drinking a can of beer in great gulps. He finished the beer and threw the can behind him into the other room, then opened another that appeared in his hand, almost out of nowhere.

"Leave her," the man said, nodding in the direction of the couch. "She's just trying to get attention." He belched, pulled up his sagging jeans, and disappeared into the other room.

The back of Bobby's neck prickled like his hair was standing on end. *What the*— He turned back to the woman. She was surrounded by flames. The sleeve of her bathrobe was smoking. Bobby took the extinguisher and sprayed white foam all around her. His throat was raw, he was drunk with vertigo. He threw the extinguisher to the floor and reached down to drag the woman off the couch.

As he bent over her, the woman opened her eyes and smiled. There

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were flames dancing in her eyes, her black hair grew into a nimbus of flame, she smiled and reached out with burning hands. Bobby felt himself falling, as if it would take a thousand years to reach bottom, falling into the woman's flaming arms. In his mind, in that snapshot instant before he knew he would die, he wondered how a burning woman could smile so beautifully.

Bobby woke up in an aid car with a medic leaning over him and jamming an oxygen mask in his face. He coughed, sucked air, gagged; he ripped the mask off and rolled over, his body racked with dry heaves.

"Wha—" His throat burned, his lungs felt singed to the bottom.

"Easy, pal." The medic helped him sit up, and offered him the oxygen mask. "Here, get a little more of this stuff in your lungs."

Bobby pushed the mask away and rasped: "What happened to the woman?"

The medic looked at him blankly. He was young and blond, with a competent, wholesome look that Bobby had always envied.

"Woman?"

"The one in the room. The one with—" He started to choke, and the medic put the mask back in his face.

"They didn't bring anybody out but you, pal. That is nobody that didn't *walk* out." He grinned and gave Bobby the thumbs up. "People calling you a hero—there's an old guy out there says you almost ran him over flying up over the curb, the next thing he knows the alarm is ringing and people are swarming out of the building. I heard a cop say the whole firetrap would've gone up in flames if you hadn't pulled that alarm."

Bobby tried to stand in the cramped aid car and almost knocked his head against a stainless steel rack. He stumbled to the rear door. Outside, he heard a police radio, and saw the red and blue flashes of the emergency lights.

The street was blocked off at either end by police. Two fire engines were pulled up in front of the building, which was no longer burning, though thin gray steam still rose from one fourth floor window.

"You'll probably get a medal, you know," the medic said, following him out of the aid car. "In this heat wave, the whole block could have been torched. . . ."

Bobby hardly heard him, because as he looked out at the crowd watching the firefighters coil their hoses and begin the cleanup, he saw the man in the T-shirt and jeans who'd been drinking in the burning apartment. The man was standing at the edge of the police line, his arms folded across his chest; he looked straight at Bobby, then frowned and shook his head.

Bobby felt dizzy and was racked by another fit of coughing. The medic

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helped him sit, and gave him a few deep lungsful of oxygen. When Bobby looked up again, the man was gone.

Later, when he gave his statement to the police, he didn't mention the man in the apartment or the woman on the couch. He only said that he *thought* there had been someone in there, but because of the smoke and the flames he couldn't be sure. The cop, a big, Italian-looking guy named Broderick, said it looked like the fire had started with a cigarette dropped between the cushions of the couch. It had probably smoldered for hours before it took hold. It was a miracle nobody had been hurt.

On the way home Bobby felt slightly drunk, as if he'd been tossing down schnapps half the night. It wasn't from the smoke: Every time he had another attack of dizziness he imagined himself falling into that woman's arms, the alarm clanging, the fire roaring in his ears.

He knew she was real. The other man, looking out at him from the crowd, proved to him that it had *all* been real, and that he wasn't going crazy. But—if he *wasn't* crazy, how the hell did the man *and* the woman get out of the place, unseen and unhurt? Did they walk out the back? Maybe. But the woman had been *on fire*. . . . Maybe she had died, and the man, in a panic, somehow got rid of her body and escaped?

He shook his head, staring into the windshield and the traffic beyond. Impossible. And there was that other impossible thing: the woman had opened her eys and smiled as she burned.

Hadn't she?

When Bobby finally got home a little past seven, his wife Donna was in the kitchen feeding their three-year-old daughter Lynnie. Lynnie was cranky and wouldn't eat, and Bobby could tell as soon as he walked into the kitchen that Donna was mad at something, probably him.

"Guess what happened to me tonight," he said, washing his hands at the sink.

"You're late."

He sat down at the table, opposite Lynnie in her high chair. "I *know* that. Don't you want to—"

"Dinner's cold, Lynnie doesn't want to eat, you haven't been home on time in three weeks. I'm tired of this, Bobby."

"There's a *reason* this time."

"You always have a reason."

"I mean it—"

"Well god damn it so do I!" She turned on him so fast that she must have been rehearsing this fight for a long time, Bobby thought. Lynnie sat motionless in her high chair, whimpering, mashed potatoes smeared on her chin and on the front of her pink cotton jumper.

"I work forty hours a week too, don't I? Who drops Lynnie off and picks her up at the daycare every day? Who fixes dinner nine times out of ten?

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Who does the laundry, buys the groceries—I'm *tired* of this, Bobby. A marriage is supposed to be a *partnership,* for Christ's sake!" She started to say more, then choked back a sob, turned and yanked Lynnie out of her chair, and rushed out of the room with the startled child in her arms.

Bobby looked down at the cold pot roast on the table, and felt like throwing it against the wall. Didn't she care that he had almost *died* tonight? Sure he wasn't perfect, but couldn't she at least show a little compassion? He'd noticed that she'd been growing more and more distant lately. A thought jumped crazily into his head: could she have a lover? Somebody at the office where she worked, maybe. . . . And if she did, he suddenly asked himself, did he really care?

That brought him up short. *Did* he? Aside from his macho pride —would it hurt him if he found out? It surprised him—*shocked* him—to find out that no, he didn't care.

"Jesus," he muttered, suddenly chilled: what had happened to their marriage?

He heard Donna in Lynnie's room, putting their daughter to bed. He went quickly into the bathroom, stripped off his smoky clothes, and got into the shower. And even though it was still sweltering outside, he felt the need to turn the hot water on full, until it came out of the nozzle in a scalding jet. There was a coldness somewhere deep inside him that needed the heat, a numbness brought on in part by the realization of his troubled marriage. He *did* still love her, didn't he? In a sudden leap of association he remembered the dark-haired woman on the couch, and the flash of heat as she looked up at him, just before he blacked out. He closed his eyes and felt the flames embrace him, and he thought: What if it *was* real?

Work the next day was a complete waste of his time and his boss's money. He couldn't concentrate; he had his crew load and unload the same trailer twice (Rocky, the big Romanian, kept giving him dirty looks and almost said something about it—the guy was itching for Bobby's job—but in the end the guy just gritted his teeth and settled for dirty looks); and the kid who swept up around the docks showed up stoned again after lunch, and Bobby let it slide for the second time in two weeks. When quitting time came, Bobby just left the hopeless mess of paperwork on his desk and was the first one out of the yard.

He hadn't consciously meant to stop at the apartment building when he first drove away from work. He really meant to go straight home, and help Donna with dinner for a change; but when he drove by the place he suddenly pulled over and got out, and before he knew what he was doing he was crossing the street.

The same rolled-up newspaper was stuck in the front door. The place was dirtier than he remembered it, and smelled of smoke. There were

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big, fist-size holes in the plaster all the way up the stairwell that he didn't remember from the day before.

The door to number 412 was open; the doorframe was still broken. The couch was gone, and where it had been there was a charred oval in the wet carpet. He heard a noise in the kitchen and went to investigate: a fat, gray-haired old woman in a man's denim shirt and baggy white trousers was on her knees scrubbing mold out of the refrigerator.

The woman looked up at him, but continued scrubbing. "You want to rent apartment?" she asked in a thick eastern European accent. She sounded like one of Bobby's Polish aunts.

Bobby felt relieved that the couple had gone. "What happened to the people that were here yesterday?"

"The Mexicans? Gone. They your friends?"

"No. I—"

"Wait—" The old woman struggled to her feet, her face brightening. "You the one put out the fire yesterday, right? You a big hero!"

Bobby shook his head and tried to stammer something. "I—"

"I kick those two out right away. They almost burn the whole place down, you know?" She raised her thick arms, her fingers mimicking flames.

"Do you know where they went?" He was surprised to hear himself speak—he didn't care where they went. He didn't *want* to know.

"Do I know?" the woman cackled. She nodded, then shook her head, a disbelieving look on her face. "Sure, I got a new address. They want me—" She suddenly began to laugh so hard she almost choked. "They want me to send them their *cleaning deposit!*" She scraped a long black strip of mold off the refrigerator with her thumbnail. "Can you *believe* these people?"

The address was to an apartment building only three blocks away. The man answered the door with a beer in his hand, and didn't seem surprised to see Bobby. He turned and disappeared into the apartment, leaving the door ajar. Taking that as an invitation of sorts, Bobby followed.

The place was unfurnished except for a portable color television on the floor in the middle of the living room, and a bright yellow milk crate stuffed with old copies of *Mademoiselle* and *Cosmopolitan* by the window. The man sat down in front of the television with his beer and didn't say a word.

The light was on in the kitchen, and Bobby heard someone rattling things in the refrigerator. He went over to the kitchen entry.

She was just straightening up with a beer can in her hand. She smiled and handed it to him; he took it mechanically, even though he didn't drink, hadn't had a drink in almost three years, since the night he'd

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gotten drunk and almost killed his brother and two women (neither of them their wives) in a car wreck.

The woman took out another beer and opened it, then stood there with one hand on her hip, grinning. She wore a white halter top and cut-off jeans, no shoes, no jewelry. Her black hair hung down almost to the middle of her back. She was about twenty, with a perfect, beautiful, youthful Latino face—though there was a hint of something more exotic, something vaguely Egyptian in her eyes, which were almost identical to her brother's (whether he was really her brother or not Bobby didn't know; but that was how he thought of him). There were no signs of burns on any of the parts of her body that Bobby could see—and in her halter and cut-offs, she wasn't hiding much of it. She said something to him in Spanish: he shrugged and shook his head.

"I don't speak Spanish," he said.

"I said," she brushed past him and into the living room, "look for me in your dreams." His arm tingled where her arm touched him. He smelled the musk and incense of her body. He heard no doors open or close; but when he looked around the living room a second later, she was gone.

"You gonna drink that?"

Bobby turned, aware that the brother had spoken to him, but at first not comprehending, as if maybe *he* had spoken in Spanish, too. Then meaning dawned on him; he started a little, looked at the beer in his hand, then shook his head. The man raised his hand, palm out. Bobby crossed the room and gave it to him. Then he just stood, frowning.

He cleared his throat. "Um, where'd she go?"

The brother shrugged without looking up from the television.

Bobby let the matter drop as something maybe he didn't really want to hear anyway. After all—if she had gotten up from that burning couch untouched. . . .

"You—ah, you her brother?"

The man looked up and grinned, then turned off the TV. "Yeah." He leaned back on his elbows. "We're gods from Mexico."

Bobby stood there with a thoughtful frown on his face, while his mind turned around and around, unable to even approach an understanding of what the man had said. *We're* something *from Mexico*. What could he have said? He drew a complete blank. He knew it must be significant, but. . . .

"I'm sorry," he finally said. "You're *what* from Mexico?"

"Gods."

"G—" Bobby almost choked trying to say it.

"Gods," the man repeated.

Bobby met the man's eyes for a second; then he looked down at the floor, frowing hard. Yes, the guy had definitely said gods. He suddenly

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had a thought, clear and pure as if he'd just awakened from a dream: *These people are nuts and I should be home with my wife and daughter.* He looked up again and cleared his throat.

"Well it's, uh, it's been nice talking to you." He headed toward the door.

"See you soon, Bobby," the man said.

Bobby stopped with the doorknob in his hand. Had he ever said his name in front of these people? He opened the door and got out of there as fast as he could.

Donna was washing the dinner dishes when Bobby got home. It was past eight this time. Lynnie was in bed, asleep. Bobby felt miserable; he hadn't *planned* on being so late. It had just worked out that way. Again.

It was his fault that the marriage was falling apart, he would have to be the first to admit it. But he felt powerless to change things. It used to be drinking, an occasional pickup at the bar that got him into trouble—he blamed it on the alcohol and the bad influences of his brother back then—but even after three years of going more-or-less straight, he was *still* getting himself into trouble, it seemed like every other day forgetting something important he was supposed to do: meetings at Lynnie's daycare center, Donna's birthday, their anniversary. He was always home late. He blamed it on paperwork; but, if he could have just pushed himself a little harder each day, he'd have been able to get most of it done on time. The problem was, he couldn't push himself.

There was a time when they were first married when he *did* push himself. Before he made supervisor at work, before the house, when he tossed boxes with the rest of the crew all day and still had plenty of time and energy left over for Donna when he got home. They were both working and money was no problem, they went to movies, ball games, took vacations in Florida. But over the years things had changed: the new became the familiar, bills began piling up, there were more responsibilities at work and at home. Slowly, life's weight was grinding him into the earth.

"—you hear me?"

Bobby blinked and shook himself, momentarily panicked. *Christ,* he thought, *what did I miss this time?*

Donna had finished the dishes and was wringing her hands in the dishtowel. "I said we're going to Mom's tomorrow after I get home from work." She was looking at her hands. "Nothing permanent, just for a few days. To think about things."

"We are?"

"*Lynnie* and me."

"Oh." Bobby leaned on the back of a kitchen chair and looked down at the floor. He could think of nothing he could say to help close the gap

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between them. Donna carefully avoided any contact as she walked by him and left the room.

Later, when he got into bed, he could tell by the stillness of the bedroom that she had been crying. He almost reached out for her, to tell her he was sorry; but a strange numbness, and a terror that she would laugh at his apology, held him back. After a while he even worked up a little anger: sure he wasn't perfect, but she never talked to him any more, never told him how she really felt, just closed herself off as if she and Lynnie lived in a world of their own. He had reason for feeling isolated, even for looking elsewhere for affection if he had to, given the circumstances. Damn right he did. He needed love too, didn't he? If she wasn't always so damn cold to him all the time. He stayed awake long after the steady sound of breathing told him she was asleep; finally, he slept.

He dreamed of the dark-haired woman. She had fire for hair, flames trailed from her arms like wings, and she swirled and danced as if she were a living flame; on her face was an expression of such complete ecstasy that he wanted to join her, and feel the flames lick at his temples as they did hers. She looked toward him and he felt as if he were merely a shadow to her, less than a fragment of a dream; then she smiled, called his name, reached out to embrace him, her arms streaming fire. As they danced together the flames enveloped him . . . he felt heat entering every molecule of his body, pushing out the cold. . . .

She murmured in his ear: "I want you. . . ."

Then it was over, and he was wide awake, and shivering. He was cold; it felt like the heat wave was finally ending. He got up and closed the window.

Donna rolled over at the sound of the window closing. "What are you doing?"

"The weather's breaking. Can't you feel it?"

"Bobby, it must be ninety in here!"

He put on a pair of slacks and a shirt, then fumbled for his shoes in the dark.

"Can't sleep," he muttered. "Think I'll go for a little walk."

"At three o'clock in the morning?"

He slipped his shoes on in the kitchen, got a drink of water, rifled the kitchen drawer for a pack of cigarettes until he remembered he'd quit when Lynnie had been born, then picked up the car keys and got his windbreaker out of the front hall closet.

The maples that lined the street made a dark canopy that the street lights couldn't penetrate. He decided to take the car instead of walk, and was soon driving down Archer Avenue, a late night talk show on the radio.

He drove aimlessly. It didn't matter where he went; somehow all that

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was important was to keep moving. The dream had disturbed him in ways he didn't understand—sure, maybe it *was* just a dream; but something in it was a little too real, a little too unsettling.

Why, he wondered, did he dream of *her?* It was Donna he should be thinking about. There had been other women in the past; but it was Donna he always came back to. She was the only one that mattered.

And she had always taken him back, no matter what kind of a shit he had been: there was a warmth and generosity in that woman, a capacity for forgiveness that defied all logic. She deserved far better than the loser she'd been dealt for a husband. And *damn* it, he suddenly decided, he was going to turn around right now and go back home and tell her so. He'd been crazy, temporarily blind—but he'd change all that now. He'd make it up to her.

He swung the car around and stopped for a red light, gripping the wheel and staring straight ahead, his thoughts centered on Donna and the apology he would give her. Suddenly the passenger-side door opened—even though Bobby could have sworn it had been locked: you don't go around *anywhere* in Chicago in the middle of the night with your car doors unlocked—and a man got in the car. It was the woman's brother.

"Just who the hell *are* you people?" Bobby shouted.

The man smiled. "I told you before, Bobby. We're gods."

"Bullshit!"

"Whatever you say, man."

"Okay, fine. I believe you," Bobby said, not believing but not knowing what to believe. Could this guy be dangerous? "You're gods. So what are you doing here, in Chicago? What do you want?"

The man raised his hand; there was a can of beer in it. "Beer," he said. He shrugged. "Other than that, who knows? This is the land of opportunity, right? I'm just biding my time." He took a swig of beer, then smacked his lips. "Television helps."

"Oh, come *on*—" This guy really *is* crazy, Bobby thought. *Televison?*

"Listen, you think immortality is *easy? You* try hanging around this planet a few thousand years, see if it doesn't make you sick." He took another swig of beer. "I know, you think we should have some kind of *loyalty* or something, right? To the *land* or the *people*. . . . Well let me tell you, Jack—nobody believes in gods any more. They don't even *remember* us! So while you *gringos* suck out whatever life is left in the world, and all the other gods are already up here becoming movie stars and astronauts and football players we're supposed to stay put? No way, man. This is where it's happening now. Give me a couple years to get the system figured out, and you know what? *I'm* going into *politics.*"

Bobby shuddered. "And—your sister?"

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"What does she want? I don't know—excitement, maybe. Men. Human sacrifices. Maybe she wants to feel mortality, *feed* on it for a while." He looked at Bobby and grinned. "Though it's pretty obvious she's got plans for *you*."

"I had a dream tonight. . . ."

The man finished his beer and tossed the empty on the back seat. "Dream, Bobby? Like now? This a dream, too?"

Bobby gripped the steering wheel and trembled from the sickening feeling that the world was falling apart around him, and would never be the same. "But—*why?* Why *me?*"

"Why?" The "god" shook his head and shrugged, then began to laugh. "Why anybody, man. Blame it on bad timing, if you want—being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or on divine retribution for the way you've been cheating on your wife all these years. Or blame it on the whim of the gods, if that makes you feel better. This universe doesn't play favorites—you were just as likely to get it as the next guy."

They were stopped at another light. The man opened the door and got out of the car, and began to walk away. Just before he vanished into the shadows he said over his shoulder: "Besides—it's all the same in the end, isn't it?"

Bobby turned the car's heater on high. But by the time he got home he was still shivering so badly he could hardly grip the steering wheel. He looked in the back seat to see if the empty beer can was still there, proof that he wasn't cracking up. It wasn't.

He slept in that morning until noon, didn't call work, didn't care. If he was nuts, what was there to care about? It was freezing cold in the house. He put on a sweater and a jacket, then went out to the Pinto and started it up. The heater seemed broken.

He made a stop at a liquor store shortly after one and bought a pint of peppermint schnapps. He drank it from the bottle as he drove, smiling to himself: *finally* a little warmth in the pit of his stomach! It went down smoothly, and tasted just like he remembered, even after three long, dry years.

He drove all afternoon, getting steadily drunker. Once, he drove past the place where he'd visited the brother and sister last night. It was burned to the ground; somehow that didn't surprise him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a bright yellow milk crate, half-melted and partly buried in the rubble.

About four, he stopped in for another pint. He was still cold, but didn't care anymore. What did it matter—what did anything matter? He was in the hands of the gods, right? He thought about the dark-haired woman . . . *now there was a hot one.* He giggled and almost sideswiped a garbage truck. He thought about the lust in her eyes, the musky smell

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of her body. If he had to be in the hands of a god, he'd picked some beautiful hands, hadn't be? The next time they met, maybe he'd generate a little heat of his own. . . . A part of his mind tried to bring him back to Donna; but that part was weak and easily pushed aside.

He staggered home early that evening, a little afraid of Donna's reaction to his drunkenness; but she wasn't around, and neither was Lynnie. The house was freezing. He turned the heat up and got a couple of winter jackets from the closet and put them on, then rambled around in the empty rooms.

He wandered through the house, opening and closing doors, checking the refrigerator, turning the television on and off. In his drunkenness, the floor seemed to pitch like the deck of a rolling ship; the walls tilted at odd angles, and the rooms were either too small or too large. He noticed a gap in the closet where some of Donna's clothes were missing. He went into Lynnie's room and found some of her clothes gone, too.

Damn! it was cold. Suddenly he wished he were rich—*that* would solve his problems. Most problems were money problems, weren't they? If only he were rich—they'd move out of the city. Get a big house in the suburbs up north, with a yard for a dog—he'd always wanted a dog—and a big fireplace in it. A fire would be nice to take the chill out, wouldn't it? He rummaged around and found a metal wastebasket and some matches and brought them into the bedroom. He stuffed the wastebasket half full of newspapers, then lit a match. His fingers were so numb that the first match missed the basket and landed on the carpet. But the next one went in, and soon he had a crackling fire to warm his hands.

He must have slept, he didn't know how long, but he woke up some time later, in bed. The television was on in the other room—must be Lynnie, he thought groggily, because Donna was asleep beside him. He was cold, shivering violently; Donna seemed to be radiating heat. He pressed himself close against her warm body and she moved against him, not asleep after all. He smiled to himself and sighed as she climbed on top of him and nuzzled his neck. They rocked together, and Bobby felt the tension growing in his loins. He tried to make it last; but Donna hissed and bucked against him as her own orgasm shook her, and he groaned and abandoned himself to his pleasure.

He opened his eyes than and saw the bedroom around him in flames. There was no Donna: he was in the embrace of a living flame. The heat was beautiful, sensual, alive—he felt almost merged with the fire all around him; then he woke fully and realized that his clothes were on fire. He was wearing so many layers of jackets and sweaters that only the top layers was alight, and so far he hadn't been seriously burned. He beat at his arms and legs and flopped wildly about on the buring bed. His scalp began to tingle—his hair was on fire. He rolled off the bed and

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began to run, crashing into walls, knocking over furniture; he ran into the living room, tripped and pulled the curtains down on top of him. He screamed; now he could feel the bite of the flames on his skin. He burst through the front door and out into the night, arms outstrectched and trailing flames, shouting at the top of his lungs for help, for forgiveness; while in the distance he could hear the laughter of the gods, and the first faint echo of sirens.●

NEXT ISSUE

(continued from page 14)

following your conscience might cost you all you have, in the compelling "The Mountain to Mohammed"; **Thomas M. Disch,** one of the most renowned and respected writers in American letters, makes his *IAsfm* prose debut (we have already featured his poetry in some of our recent issues) with a wickedly sardonic examination of "The Abduction of Bunny Steiner, or A Shameless Lie"; **Pat Cadigan,** one of the magazine's most popular writers, returns in an antic mood with some very funny advice on "Fifty Ways To Improve Your Orgasm"; new writer **Maureen McHugh** delivers a powerful look at survival and love inside the concentration camps of a troubled future America, in a brilliant and moving novella called "Protection"; new writer **Tony Daniel** takes us to a high-tech future for an intricate pavane of passion and identity, in the hard-edged "Faces"; **Martha Soukup** returns with a disturbing look at some ghosts that just *won't* be laid to rest, in "The Arbitrary Placement of Walls"; new writer **W. M. Shockley** makes a hard-hitting *IAsfm* debut with an uncompromising examination of a man faced with some *very* hard choices indeed, in the unsettling story of "A Father's Gift"; **Rand B. Lee** returns after a long absence with a supernatural thriller about just how hard "Letting Go of Waverley" can prove to be; and **Gene Van Troyer** makes an exciting *IAsfm* debut with the story of an unexpected and unusual encounter in deep space, in the haunting "Kayla, Lost." *Plus* our usual array of columns and features.

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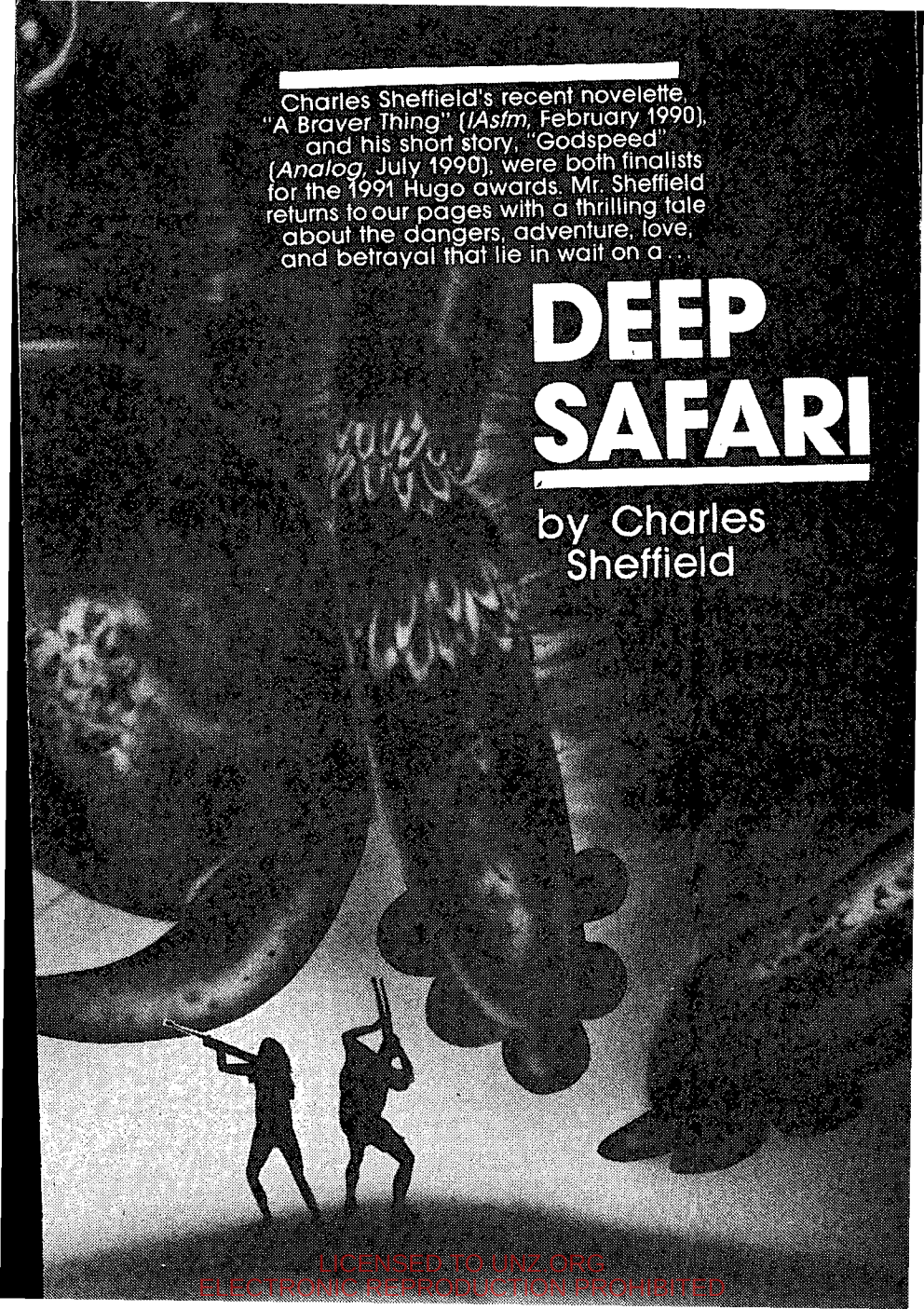
Charles Sheffield's recent novelette, "A Braver Thing" (IAsfm, February 1990), and his short story, "Godspeed" (Analog, July 1990), were both finalists for the 1991 Hugo awards. Mr. Sheffield returns to our pages with a thrilling tale about the dangers, adventure, love, and betrayal that lie in wait on a . . .
DEEP SAFARI
by Charles Sheffield

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Tradition calls for a celebration on the evening that the hunt is concluded.

The hunters will be tired, some will be hurting, some may even have died. There will be a party anyway, and it will go on for most of the night. Tradition is the younger sister of ritual. Rituals are better if they do not make sense.

I do not like to attend the parties. I have seen too many. The theory is that the hunters should be permitted to overindulge in food, in drink, in sex, in everything, but particularly in talk, because on hunt night they want to re-live the glorious excitement of the chase, the shared danger, the deeds of valor, the climactic event of the kill.

Sounds wonderful. But for every hero or heroine flushed with quiet or noisy pride there will be three or four others, drinking and talking as loud as any but glancing again and again at their companions, wondering if anyone else noticed how at the moment of crisis and danger they flinched and failed.

I notice. Of course. I couldn't afford not to notice. My job is to orchestrate everything from first contact to *coup de grâce*, and to do that I have to know where everyone is and just what he or she is doing. That is much harder work than it sounds, so when a hunt is over all I want is sleep. But that relief is denied to me by my obligatory attendance at the post-hunt party.

The morning that Everett Halston called, the hunt celebration the previous night had been even harder to take than usual. The group had consisted of a dozen rich merchants, neophytes to hunting but in spite of that—because of that?—determined to show their nerve by tackling one of the animal kingdom's most efficient and terrifying predators.

I had warned them, and been overruled. When we finally met the quarry, all but two of my group had frozen. They were too overwhelmed by fear to advance or even to flee. Three of us stepped forward, stood our ground, and made a difficult kill. A *very* difficult kill. Without a little luck the roles of hunter and prey could easily have been reversed.

Perhaps because of that near-disaster the hunt party had been even noisier and wilder than usual. My group of twelve participants was augmented by an equal number of male and female partners, none of them the least tired and every one ready to dance 'til dawn.

About four-thirty I managed to slip away and collapse into bed. And there I found not the calm and peaceful sleep that I had looked forward to for twelve hours, but a dream-reprise of the hunt finale as it might have been.

I had managed to move the whole group to the bottom of the pit in good order, because they had not so far had a sight of the living prey. I anticipated trouble as soon as that happened. Before we entered Adestis *mode*

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we had studied the structure and actions of the spider, but I knew from previous experience that wouldn't mean a damn during live combat. It's one thing to peer at an animal that's no bigger across the carapace than the nail on your index finger, to study its minute jaws and poison glands and four delicate tube-like spinnerets, and plan where you will place your shots for maximum effect; it's another matter when you are linked into your Adestis *simulacrum, and the spider that you are supposed to hunt and kill is towering ten paces away from you like a gigantic armored tank, its invincible back three times as high as the top of your head.*

Before I had the group organized to my satisfaction, our quarry took the initiative. The spider came from its hiding-place in the side of the pit and in that first rush it came fast. *I saw a dark-brown body with eight pearly eyes patterning its massive back. The juggernaut drove forward on the powerful thrust of four pairs of seven-jointed legs. Those legs had seemed as thin and fragile as flower stamens in our studies, but now they were bristly trunks, each as thick as a simulacrum's body. The* chelicerae, *the pointed crushing appendages at the front of the spider's maw, were massive black pincers big enough to bite your body in two.*

Without taking the time to see how my group was reacting, I did what I had explicitly warned them not to do. I lifted my weapon and sprayed projectiles at the three eyes that I could see. I think I got one of them, but the carapace itself was far too tough to be penetrated. Ricocheting projectiles flew everywhere. The spider was not seriously injured—I knew it would not be. But maybe it wondered if we were really its first choice for dinner, because it halted in its forward sweep. That gave me a little breathing space.

I scanned my group. Not reassuring. For ten of them the sight of the advancing spider had been more than they could take. Their personal simulacra stood motionless, weapons pointed uselessly at the ground.

These Adestis *units were not furnished with sound generation or receiving equipment. Everything had to be signaled by our actions. We had rehearsed often enough, but unfortunately this was nothing like rehearsal. I ran forward waving at my group to lift their weapons and follow me, but only two of them did. They moved to stand on either side and just behind me.*

I glanced at their two helmet I.D.'s as I turned to urge the rest to advance and deploy in a half-circle as we had planned. Even though I would never reveal the information to anyone, I liked to know who the cool ones were—they might play Adestis *again some day. None of the others moved, but a second later the weapon of the simulacrum on my right was lifting into position, while his other arm reached to tap my body in warning.*

I spun around. Forget the half circle. The spider was coming forward

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again, in a scuttling rush that covered the space between us at terrifying speed.

Before I could fire the predator had reached us. I saw the maw above me, the dark serrated edge of the carapace, the colonies of mite and tick parasites clinging to the coarse body bristles. Then I was knocked flat by the casual swat of one powerful leg.

I sprawled under the house-wide body and saw the chelicerae *reach down, seize one of my companions at midriff, and crush until his simulacrum fell apart into two pieces.*

He writhed but he did not scream—here.

(I knew that his real body, coupled by its telemetry headset to control his simulacrum and receive its sensory inputs, would be writhing and screaming in genuine agony.

It didn't have to be that way. I would have been quite happy to do without pain signals altogether, useful as they might be as a warning for simulacrum injury. But any proposal to eliminate pain was consistently vetoed by the paying customers for Adestis. *They* wanted *referred pain when their simulacrum was injured. It was part of the* macho [*male and female*] *view of the game. The* Adestis *hunt had to feel* real, *as real as it could be; occasional deaths, from the heart failure that can accompany terror and intense agony, were an important part of what they were paying for.)*

And at the moment my own body, the gigantic form that somewhere infinitely far above us sat motionless in the Adestis *control theater, was within a split-second of its own writhing, screaming agony. The spider knew I was underneath it—knew it not from sight, which was a sense it did not much rely on, but from touch. The legs, in spite of their power, were enormously sensitive to feel and to vibration patterns. The spider was backing up, questing. It wanted me. I was shaking with fear, my hands trembling and my belly so filled with icy terror that the muscles of my whole mid-section were locked rigid.*

And then came the single precious touch of good luck, the accident of position that saved me and the rest of our group. As the spider moved over me I saw the pedicel; there it was, the thin neck between cephalothorax and abdomen, the most vulnerable point of the whole organism. It was directly above my head, impossible to miss. I lifted my weapon. Fired. And blew the spider into two clean halves that toppled like falling mountains on either side of me.

But not this time. In my dream; the pedicel moved out of view before I could squeeze off a shot. I was staring up at the hard underside of the cephalothorax—at the head section—at the doomsday jaws and glistening poison glands as they lowered towards me. They would engulf me, swallow

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me whole, to leave me struggling and hopeless within the dark interior cavern of the spider's body.

I knew, at some level of my mind, that spiders do not swallow their prey. They inject enzymes, pre-digest their victims, and suck them dry. But we select our own personal nightmares. I would die slowly, in the night of the spider's body cavity.

I braced myself for the unendurable.

And came to shuddering wakefulness at the loud, insistent ring of my bedside telephone. I realized where I was and groped for the handset, almost too relieved to breathe.

"Fletcher?" The voice in my ear was familiar. It ought to have suggested a face and a name, but in my dazed condition it was just a voice.

"Uh-uh." I squinted at the clock. Seven-fifteen. Two and three-quarter hours of sleep. Although I had eaten little and drunk nothing last night, I felt hung over and a hundred years old. Seven-fifteen P.M. was what I'd had in mind as a decent wake-up time.

"*Clancy* Fletcher?" insisted the voice.

"Uh-uh." I cleared my throat. "Yes. That's me. I'm Clancy Fletcher."

"Don't sound like him. This is Everett Halston. I need to talk to you. You awake enough to take anything in?"

"Yes." I'd found the face, and the name, even before he gave it. He sounded older.

Palpitations and inability to breathe came back, worse than when I woke. *Everett Halston.* He really was old. The Pearce family's professional aide and confidant for three generations. And Miriam's personal lawyer.

"Did Miriam—" I began.

"Listen first, Mr. Fletcher, then you can ask questions." The brisk, salty voice was oddly reassuring. Its next words were not. "Dr. Miriam Pearce left a tape with me, some time ago, and gave me specific instructions. I was to play that tape only if, in my judgment, she was in very serious trouble and unable to act on her own behalf.

"Late last night I played the tape. I played it because Dr. Miriam is unconscious, and no one seems able to tell me when or if she is likely to awaken."

"Where is she?"

"I'll get to that. You were always a good listener. Listen now. Dr. Miriam is at New Hanover Hospital, on the fifth floor. *Don't hang up, Mr. Fletcher. I know you want to.* Wait until I am finished. She was moved to an intensive care unit two days ago, from her own research facility, a few hours after she was discovered unconscious. Her vital signs are stable and she is being fed intravenously. However, the attendant physicians are much concerned about her condition. They state—insofar

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as one can persuade a physician to make any firm statement whatsoever—that they have ruled out all forms of stroke, tumor, and subdural hemorrhage. CAT and PET scans show no abnormalities, although they plan to repeat those today.

"I am now going to play you Dr. Miriam's tape, or at least the portion of it that concerns you. Wait a few moments."

I waited, suspended from life. It was three years since I had seen Miriam Pearce, more than two since I had spoken to her.

"If there is a strictly legal decision to be made, Everett, and I am for any reason unable to participate, I want you to use your own best judgment." Miriam's delivery had not altered at all. Slightly uneven in rhythm, as though she constantly changed her mind about how the sentence ought to end. Confident, jaunty, and a little short-tongued, so that "r" was always a trifle breathier than normal.

"However, other situations may arise. I could be in danger, or encounter a problem where conventional solutions cannot be applied. It may even be that you do not know what has happened to me, or where I am. In such a case, I want you to contact Clancy Fletcher. Ask him to help me. And commit to him all the financial or other resources that you control in my name."

The message ended, or was more likely cut off by Halston. There was a dead silence, while my head spun with questions. The financial resources of Miriam, and of the whole Pearce family, were huge. They could buy the absolute best of anything including medical care. Danger I might have been able to handle. But what could I possibly do for her if she was sick?

"Mr. Halston, I'm not a doctor."

"I am aware of that."

"I can't help Miriam."

"If you do not try, you certainly cannot. However, I think you are wrong. Let me suggest that you should not pre-judge your potential usefulness. If you intend to proceed to New Hanover Hospital, your point of contact there is Dr. Thomas Abernathy."

Halston paused, I am sure for my benefit. He felt that I would need time to recover from the shock. Halston knew that Tom Abernathy was Miriam's close colleague and probably her sexual partner, as surely as he knew that I was Miriam Pearce's sometime collaborator and lover. He also, by the sound of it, suspected or knew something that he was not going to reveal to me.

"I have told Thomas Abernathy of Dr. Miriam's instructions to me," he went on. "I have also informed him that those instructions will be supported by me and by the full weight of the Pearce estate."

"He must have loved that."

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"Let us say that he did not offer an argument, once he had listened to Dr. Miriam's tape."

Of course not. Tom Abernathy was far, far smarter than Clancy Fletcher. Abernathy knew instinctively what I had only learned the hard way: You should not try to argue with fifteen billion dollars. That much money creates winds like a hurricane, all around it. A wise man allows himself to be swept along with the gale, but he does not fight it. Because he cannot win.

"Could I hear the tape again?"

"Certainly."

We both listened in silence. Miriam's voice was so infinitely familiar. *Too* familiar. I had heard her on a nanodoc television broadcast less than a year ago, a couple of months after a minor operation on her larynx. Her voice was slightly affected then. I had assumed that the change would be permanent.

"Mr. Halston, *when* did Miriam make that tape?"

There was a click as though some recording device had been turned off, followed by a dry chuckle at the other end of the line. "Mr. Fletcher, you are as perceptive as ever. This tape has been in my possession for over three years."

Three years. Before Miriam hated me.

"I suspect that Dr. Miriam Pearce forgot about it," he went on, "or did not get around to changing it. However I will argue, in a court of law if necessary, that no action of Dr. Miriam has ever led me to suspect that the recording reflects anything other than her current wishes. Now. Will you be going to New Hanover Hospital?"

"As soon as we get through."

"Then I will say only three more things. First, I will make sure that you are expected at the hospital. Second, Thomas Abernathy will probably not be your friend."

"I know that. What's the other one?"

"Just good luck, Clancy. Good luck for you; and good luck for Miriam."

The New Hanover Hospital was a nine-story spire of glass and carved stone, a whited sepulchre jutting from well-tended lawns.

In one sense it *was* a memorial, a testament to Pearce money. The entrance hall bore a message inlaid into its marble mosaic floor, informing the world that the construction of the edifice had been made possible by Pearce munificence. The fifth floor, where Miriam lay unconscious, was known as the Meredith Franklin Pearce ward.

I did not get to see Miriam at once, much as I wanted to. When the elevator door opened Thomas Abernathy was there, lying in wait for me.

We had never met, although I had studied his career from afar. But

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still I did not *know* him. As he came forward with outstretched hand I watched his face closely, as a druid might have peered from the misted woods at an arriving Christian. What *was* the newcomer who had taken my place?

Just as important, what had she told him of me? Had there been long afternoons of naked revelation, luxurious nights when Tom Abernathy heard all about poor, despised Clancy? Miriam babbled after love-making, in a dreamy stream of consciousness at odds with her usual controlled speech.

We all give to ourselves an importance that is seldom justified. Dr. Thomas Abernathy did stare at me when we shook hands, but it was with perplexity rather than knowing amusement. He did not seem to know who or what I was. But he himself looked a real smoothie, tall and fair and elegant, with a just-right handshake and a physician's perfect bedside manner.

One that he was not willing to waste too much on me.

"I do have the right person, don't I?" he said after a few moments of critical inspection. "When Everett Halston said Clancy Fletcher, I thought, if that's the toy man. . . ."

"The Small Game Hunter. That's right. That's me." It was the way that the present owners of *Adestis* ran their television advertisements, a business over which I had no control. *Did you think that the Big Game Hunt became impossible when the largest carnivores became extinct? (Television shots of a rearing grizzly, a leaping tiger). Not so! The world's most deadly game has always been at smaller scale. (Three shots, in rapid sequence, of a praying mantis, a dragonfly, and a trapdoor spider, enlarged to the scale that would be seen by a simulacrum). These prey are available to hunt today, in unlimited numbers. Join an* Adestis *safari, and go on a* Small Game Hunt*—where the line between hunter and hunted can never be drawn. (A final shot of a writhing figure, totally human in appearance as a true simulacrum never was, being dismembered by a quartet of furious soldier ants).*

It was one way to make a living.

"I'd like to see Miriam Pearce. I assume that she is still unconscious?"

"I'm afraid so."

Abernathy hesitated. It was easy to see his problem. Someone had been dumped in his lap who presumably knew nothing about medicine, someone who made his living in a trivial way from what Thomas Abernathy must regard as toys designed for adults with more money than sense. And poor Doctor Tom, who was surely a god in his own domain, had to *humor* this clown. Because the clown had unfortunately been given the keys to the Pearce treasure chest, and if Clancy Fletcher felt like it he

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could throw Abernathy out of his own hospital, at least until Miriam Pearce awoke.

The terrible thing was my own feelings. I hated Abernathy from deep inside me. If I was to help Miriam, I had to control myself.

The other terrible thing, of course, was my conviction that I was inadequate to help Miriam in any way.

"Do you have any idea what happened to her?" I had to start Abernathy talking, or that conviction was bound to prove correct.

"I have—a theory." He was finally moving, leading me along the corridor away from the elevator. "You know, I assume, that Dr. Miriam Pearce is one of the world's pioneers in the field of micro-surgery?"

"Yes. I know that."

"Well, what is not so well-known is that she has over the years been operating at smaller and smaller scales. When she began, ten years ago, her first generation of remotely-guided instruments for micro-surgery were huge by today's standards. Each one was as big as your fingertip. They were also primitive in their remote control capability. The human operator could use them to perform only limited surgical functions. However, about three years ago Dr. Pearce learned how to produce a line of much more sophisticated instruments, smaller and more versatile."

I knew all about that, too, far more than Thomas Abernathy would ever know. But my attention was elsewhere. As we were talking we had moved along the corridor and at last entered a private room. Miriam lay on a bed near the window, eyes not quite closed. I stepped nearer and saw a thin slit of pale blue iris. Her color was good, her expression calm. She was still beautiful, not at all like a person unconscious because of accident or disease. She seemed only asleep. But in her arm were the I.V.'s and next to her stood a great bank of electronic equipment.

I lifted her hand and pressed it gently. She did not stir. I squeezed harder. No response. I leaned over and spoke into her ear. "Miriam!"

"Naturally, we have tried all the usual and safe stimulants." Tom Abernathy's expression said that he disapproved of my crude experiments. "Chemical, aural, and mechanical. The responses have been limited and puzzling."

Chemical, aural, mechanical. Drugs, noises, jabs. They won't wake Sleeping Beauty. Did you try a kiss?

I wanted to. Instead I straightened up and said, "You say you have a theory for what's happening?"

"I do. Dr. Pearce next produced a line of smaller micro-surgery instruments, each one no bigger than a pea, and each capable of much finer control by the human operator. They were a huge success, and they have transformed surgical technique.

"But they were still too big for certain operations, particularly for fine

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work within the brain. A few months ago Dr. Pearce took the next step. Nano-surgery, with dozens of multiple, mobile, remote-controlled tools far smaller than a gnat, and all under the control of a single operator."

He glanced at me for a reaction. I nodded to show that I was impressed. If he hoped to amaze me, he had a long way to go. There were *Adestis* games in which the player's simulacrum was small enough to fight one-on-one with hungry single-celled amoebas, and there were other games in which one human controlled dozens or even hundreds of simulacra. But I was beginning to see why old Everett Halston believed I might have a role to play in solving Miriam's problem. I didn't know medicine or surgery, but I knew *Adestis* technology better than anyone on earth.

"We tested the nanodocs on animals," went on Abernathy, "and they seemed to work fine. So after we had the permits we performed our first work on human subjects. That was just five days ago. In my opinion those operational experiments succeeded perfectly. But Miriam—Dr. Pearce—had her reservations. She believed that although the operations had given satisfactory results, our level of control of the nanodocs was an order of magnitude more crude than the design ought to permit. Her theory was that we were making tools so small that their performance was being adversely affected by quantum effects. I tended to agree with her.

"That was where we were three days ago, when I left for a conference in Rochester. I returned a day later, and learned that Miriam had been found unconscious in the lab.

"She had been in perfect health when I left, but naturally we assumed at first that it was some conventional medical problem. It was only when the routine tests showed normal results that I went back to see what Miriam had been doing while I was away. Yesterday I found that a set of the new nanodocs was missing—and the monitors insisted that they had been placed under Miriam's control. According to the monitors, they are *still* under her control, even though she is unconscious."

"But where are they?" I was afraid that I knew the answer. Miriam had her own ideas as to how medical tests ought to be conducted.

Thomas Abernathy nodded to the body on the bed. "I feel sure they are inside her, a couple of hundred of them. I can't prove that idea—or let's say, I dare not try. The only way to be sure would be to break the telemetry contact between Dr. Pearce and the nanodocs. If they *are* inside her, then letting them run out of control might kill her. Because in view of her condition it is natural to assume that they are lodged somewhere within her brain."

I took another look at the silent beauty on the bed. If hundreds of nanodocs were running wild inside Miriam, it did not show.

"What do you plan to do about it, Dr. Abernathy?"

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He stared at me, uncertain for the first time since we had met. "I do not know what to do, Mr. Fletcher. Several of my colleagues are urging exploratory surgery—" (*Saw the top off Miriam's head. Slice open the protective membrances of her brain. Dive in, poke around, and see what you can find.* I shivered.) "—but I regard that as a last resort. I would rather wait, watch, and pray for a change in her condition."

Which was also a last resort. Strange. Abernathy had analyzed the problem to the point where it was obvious what had to be done. But he could not or would not take that next step.

"Are there more of the nanodocs—the same size as the ones that are missing?"

"There are several sets of them, in all important respects identical."

"That's good. Is there a staff cafeteria in the building?"

"What?"

"I must have something to eat, because I don't know how long this might take. And then I'll need to practice with your nanodocs for a few hours, to make sure I have the feel for these particular models. Then I'm going into Dr. Pearce."

I took a last look at Miriam, willing her to wake as I started for the door. Given a choice, I certainly didn't *want* to have to go in. I wanted to go home, and go to bed. Preferably with Miriam.

"You can't do that!" Abernathy had lost his smooth self-control. "You are not a physician. You are an *Adestis* employee. Just because you have a bit of experience with your stupid little toys doesn't mean you can handle nanodocs! This is very specialized equipment, very complex. It takes months to learn."

"I've had months. In fact, I've had years." I tried to keep the bitterness out of my voice as I walked from the room. I'm sure I failed. "While I'm gone, Dr. Abernathy, I suggest that you check the name of the patent holder for the first micro-surgery developments. The name of the *original* holder, I mean—the idiot who had all the patents, until the Pearce family broke them and acquired the rights for themselves. And while you're at it, check who was the creator, founder and hundred percent owner of *Adestis*, before it was bankrupted and taken over."

Whatever I had done to Miriam, her family had paid back in full.

The food in the cafeteria was ridiculously over-priced at seven dollars. I know it cost that, because I had left home without money or any form of credit, and I had to sign what amounted to a personal IOU with the manager for the contents of my tray.

But that's all I do know about the food, or the cafeteria. I must have eaten, but I don't remember it.

I was almost finished when Thomas Abernathy marched in and sat

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down opposite me. He had with him an attractive dark-haired woman in her early twenties, who gave me a tentative smile as she sat down.

Abernathy took the document that he was holding and pushed it across the table towards me.

"This is a hospital, Mr. Fletcher, not a carnival." He was struggling to be polite, but hardly succeeding. "It isn't 'anything goes' here. We have strict rules, which every one of us has to obey."

I glanced at the paper. I had an idea what it might say.

"All right. So I'm not 'authorized personnel' for the use of the nanodoc equipment. Who is?"

"I have some experience. Dr. Pearce, of course. And Miss Lee, who is a specialist in nanodoc operations." He nodded his head at the woman sitting next to him.

She held out her hand but glanced at Tom Abernathy for approval before she spoke. "Belinda Lee. When Dr. Abernathy said you were here, I told him that I'd just love to meet you. You don't know it, but you and *Adestis* are putting me through medical school."

I let that opening pass. She was being as sociable as she knew how, but we didn't have time for it.

"You could *make* me authorized personnel if you wanted to, Dr. Abernathy. It is under your jurisdiction."

"There's no reason for me to do so. I now agree with you, Mr. Fletcher, interior exploration of Dr. Pearce by nanodocs is a logical and urgent step. Miss Lee and I will make that exploration. I also admit your experience with remotely controlled micro-surgical equipment"—so he had checked on me, at least a little. What else had he found out?—"but we do not need you. Also, we cannot afford the time needed to train you."

"I have to disagree. You need me, even if you don't *want* me. You'll be making use of hospital equipment. This whole place runs on Pearce support. If I call Everett Halston he'll contact the Board of Trustees. You'll have an injunction slapped on you against using nanodoc equipment, one that will take weeks to break."

The last trace of bedside manner vanished. "You idiot, are you trying to *kill* Miriam? *You* are the one who suggested we have to go in and find out what happened to the nanodoc units inside her."

"We must do that. We *can* do that. As a team. You, I, and if you like Miss Lee. If you authorize me to use the equipment, I'll bless the exercise at once with Everett Halston."

He grabbed the paper, stood up, and rushed out of the cafeteria without another word. Belinda Lee gave me an unhappy and puzzled look before she followed him. Why was I being so unreasonable?

I carried on with the meal. I was unreasonable because I sensed possible dangers that Abernathy could not. He lacked the right experience.

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He would agree to my participation—he had no choice—but it was not an auspicious beginning to a safari when team members were so divided and suspicious at the outset. Teams were supposed to cooperate totally.

On the other hand, I had been on an expedition where the team members had started out as close and loving and trusting as humans could get, and that one had ended in bitterness, disappointment, and heartbreak.

Maybe this time the process would work the other way round.

Belinda Lee was my instructor for the nanodoc units. Perhaps Tom Abernathy would not spend more time with me than he was obliged to; but to be more charitable, he also had two important tasks to perform.

First, a set of nanodocs had to be tuned to Miriam's individual body chemistry. Otherwise her immune system would be triggered at our entry and we would be attacked by every leukocyte that we encountered. Although they couldn't damage the nanodocs, they could certainly impede us.

As a second and trickier assignment, Tom Abernathy had to decide our access route into Miriam's brain. He and the neurological specialists had already decided our destination. Although the sleep state of humans and animals is controlled by an area at the rear of the brain known as the reticular formation, Miriam's responses to stimuli had them convinced that her troubles did not lie there. The problem was in the cerebral hemispheres. But to the tiny nanodocs, those hemispheres were like buildings a mile on each side. Where *specifically* should we be heading?

I was glad I did not have that responsibility. My own worries were quite enough.

Two hours had been allocated by the hospital for my training session, but it was clear in the first five minutes that they had been far too generous. True, two hours was less than half the training time that I insisted on before anyone could take part in *Adestis,* and in that case the simulacra were far more human in appearance than the hospital nanodocs. But for most team members the training session was a first exposure to micro-operation. Familiarity with the shape of their remote analogues was reassuring to them.

In fact, the proportions of a human are quite wrong for optimum performance of anything less than half an inch tall. Holding to the human shape in some ways makes things harder. As the size of an organism decreases, the importance of gravity as a controlling force becomes less and less, while wind and vibration and terrain roughness are increasingly dominant. Six legs become much better than two. At the smallest scale, the Brownian motion forces of individual molecular collisions have to be taken into account. Learning to gauge and allow for those changes is far more important than worrying about actual body shape.

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On the other hand, as soon as I had seen the latest nanodocs I could not agree with Miriam and Thomas Abernathy that quantum effects might be important. Wispy and evanescent as the tiny currents might be that control the simulacra, they were still orders of magnitude too big to be affected by quantum fluctuations.

There was certainly an unanticipated problem with the new nanodocs and I certainly had no idea what it might be. But it was not what Miriam and Tom Abernathy suspected.

As soon as Belinda Lee had watched me work a team of nanodocs for a few minutes—each one a little bloated disk a few tens of micrometers long, with half a dozen legs/scrapers/knives along each side—she took off her telemetry coupler and leaned back in her seat. She waited patiently until I emerged from remote-control mode.

"You ought to be teaching *me*, you know." She was a different person when Tom Abernathy was not around. "How on earth did you make them zip *backwards* so fast, and still know where they were going? I'm supposed to be our expert, and I can't do that. The optical sensors won't turn up and over the back."

"No. They will turn *downward*, though, and scan underneath the body. You don't have enough experience looking between your legs and running backward."

She offered me an owlish look. Belinda Lee thought I was poking fun at her. I was and I wasn't. I had never done what I suggested in my own body, but I had done it a hundred times with *Adestis* simulacra of all shapes and sizes. As I said, the hunter simulacra are all humanoid; but I had been both hunter and hunted, because we run hunts with remote-controlled simulated prey as well as with the real thing.

"So how is *Adestis* putting you through medical school?"

Belinda Lee seemed really nice, and I didn't want to upset her. I needed at least one friend at the New Hanover Hospital.

She laughed, the sort of full-throated laugh I had once heard from Miriam. "I was convinced you didn't want to hear. I was crushed in the cafeteria when you didn't ask."

"Sorry. I had other things on my mind. What did you have to do with *Adestis*? I'm sure you've never been involved in a hunt. I would have remembered you."

She took it for the compliment it was, and dipped her head toward me in acknowledgment. "I had problems when I was a teenager. My parents wanted me to be a doctor, but I'd heard of *Adestis* and I was fascinated by it. My life's ambition was to be team leader on an *Adestis* underwater safari. You know, the Larval Hunt."

"I sure do. Scary stuff. They wouldn't sign off?" You need written parental permission to enter *Adestis* mode before age twenty-one.

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"Not in a million years, they said. So I did the dutiful daughter bit, went off to college and majored in biology. But I never stopped thinking about *Adestis*. For my senior thesis I wondered about the possible uses of that sort of technology in medical work. I wrote and asked, and some sweetheart at *Adestis* headquarters sent me a bale of terrific information. I used it to write probably the longest undergraduate thesis in the college's history. Of course I had no idea that Dr. Pearce was years and years ahead of me. But my prof knew, and he sent my finished project to her. She called a couple of days later. And here I am."

That sounded like Miriam. She recognized the real thing when she saw it. Her first exposure to *Adestis* had come through a friend at the hospital, a woman who had been on a hunt and regarded it all as a lark. But Miriam didn't. Before the end of the first training session she was asking me if I knew any way that *Adestis* control technology could take her clumsy microsurgery tools down in size and up in handling precision.

That had been the beginning of the patents. And the *Adestis* expeditions with Miriam. And all the rest.

I used to think I knew the real thing, too. I recalled that highly detailed and imaginative student inquiry, even if I had not remembered Belinda's name.

At the same time, I began to worry. If Belinda Lee had begun to work with *Adestis* technology only after she graduated, she couldn't have more than a couple of years experience with simulacra. Also she had never been on a hunt, and therefore probably never been exposed to a dangerous situation. Yet Tom Abernathy had described her as a *specialist* in nanodoc operation—a specialist, presumably, compared with him. In agreeing that the three of us would go into Miriam, I had burdened myself with two team members lacking the right sort of experience.

Or was I being paranoid? What made me think that a safari into Miriam might be *dangerous*? Tom Abernathy and Belinda Lee certainly didn't think so.

Maybe that was one reason.

The other reason was more complex. For this safari, I too would lack the right experience. I had never, in all my years with *Adestis*, been exposed to a situation where the environment within which my simulacrum would operate was more precious to me than my own survival.

Our entry into Miriam began with an argument. I wanted to go in with a single nanodoc simulacrum each. Tom Abernathy argued for many more.

"There are several *hundred* in Dr. Pearce's brain. Three simulacra won't be able to remove them, even if we find them."

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"I know. Once we understand what's happening, though, we can introduce more."

"But think of the *time* it will take."

He seemed to forget the full day that he had wasted before I came along to force a decision.

And yet he was right. His way would be quicker. So why wouldn't I go along with it?

That was a difficult question. In the end it all came down to instinct. A single simulacrum was easier to control than a group of them, even though a group had more firepower. But firepower against *what*? The nanodocs were not armed, the way that *Adestis* hunters had to be armed. Why should they be? I was too used to thinking in terms of a prey, and that didn't apply in this case.

Yet I stuck to my position, and overruled Abernathy. We would go with single simulacra, one per person.

But I also, illogically, wished that my nanodoc unit was equipped with something more powerful than the tiny scalpels and drug injection stings built into its eight legs.

Destination: Brain.

We had adopted remote-control mode outside Miriam's body as soon as the nanodocs were inside the syringe. We remained there for fifteen minutes, long enough to become completely comfortable with our host simulacra.

By the end of that time I knew my partners much better. Tom Abernathy was confident but clumsy. He might understand the theory, but no matter what he *thought* he knew about nanodoc control he didn't have good reflexes or practical experience.

Belinda Lee was far better, a little nervous but quite at ease in her assumed body. If she ever dropped out of medical school there would be a place for her on the *Adestis* underwater safaris. (And I'd be more than glad to give up my own involvement in those. The larval animal life of streams and ponds is fierce enough to make a mature insect or arachnid look like nature's pacifist. Maybe Belinda would change her mind when she saw at first hand Nature red in mandible and proboscis.)

We were injected into Miriam's left carotid artery at neck level, our three nanodoc units at my insistence holding tightly to each other. I did not want us separated until we were well within her brain. Otherwise I at least might never get there.

As we ascended Miriam's bloodstream toward the three *meninges* membranes that surround and protect the brain, it occurred to me that my two partners would soon know my own weaknesses. I could handle my nanodoc better than Belinda and far better than Tom, but I was

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missing something they both had: a good working knowledge of human anatomy or micro-structure. Abernathy had given me a lightning briefing, of which I remembered only a fraction. I peered around us. The minute compound eyes of the nanodocs couldn't see much at all. They delivered a blurry, red-tinged view of surroundings illuminated by the nanodoc's own pulsed light sources, enough so that I could see that we were being carried along a wide tunnel whose sides were barely visible. All around swam a flotsam of red blood cells, not much smaller than we were, interspersed with the occasional diminutive platelets. Through that swirl a white cell would occasionally come close, extend a testing pseudopod, and then retreat. Tom Abernathy's preliminary work on the nanodocs was satisfactory. The prowling leukocytes had no great interest in us.

I knew that the blood also carried an unseen flux of chemical messengers, taking status information from one part of the body to all the rest. Tom Abernathy could probably have explained all that to me, if our nanodocs had been capable of better communication. They were better than most *Adestis* units, because they did possess a primitive vocal interface; but it was at a bit transfer rate so low that Abernathy, Lee, and I were practically restricted to single word exchanges. We would mostly convey our meaning by stylized gestures.

Our progress through the internal carotid artery was far slower than I had expected. As we drifted from side to side and occasionally touched a spongy wall, I had time to explore every function of my nanodoc. And to reflect on its present owners.

Three years ago I was convinced that the Pearce family had acted in direct reprisal for what I had done to Miriam. It took a long time to realize that nothing *personal* was involved, that anger at the family made no more sense than rage at the gravid sphex wasp who takes and paralyzes a live grasshopper as feeding ground for its hatching larva.

I doubt if Miriam herself was aware of what had happened. Through her the Pearces had been alerted to the existence of a highly valuable tidbit, in the form of the *Adestis* patents. Miriam wanted and needed those for her own medical work, but that was irrelevant. It was the desire to increase assets that controlled group action, and to the family there was nothing more natural than the use of wealth to acquire my patents. They had simply turned on an existing machinery of scientists, lawyers, lobbyists, and political influence. I doubt if any one of them ever suspected that the owner of the patents also happened to be the man who had hurt Miriam. For if she had never talked of me to her present lover, would she have spoken to her family?

I liked to think that she would not.

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The nanodoc hooked tightly to my four left legs started to tug gently at them. I turned and saw Tom Abernathy's gesturing digit.

"Cir-cle—of—Will-is," said a thin, distorted voice.

We had reached Checkpoint One. After passing along the internal carotid artery we were through the protective membranes of the *dura mater* and *pia mater* and were now at the *circulus arteriosus*, the "circle of Willis," a vascular formation at the base of the brain where all the major feed arteries meet. Abernathy was steering us into the anterior cerebral artery, which would take us into the cerebral cortex.

From this point on it would be up to me. Abernathy had made it clear that he could guide us no farther.

I had not told him that I too had little idea where we would go once we were within the cerebral hemispheres. He had worries enough.

And I was not quite ready to mention, to Tom Abernathy or to Belinda Lee, that something seemed to be slightly wrong with my simulacrum.

The change was so subtle that I doubted if Belinda, and still less Tom, could notice it. Only someone who had developed the original *Adestis* circuits and lived with them, through every good or bad variation, would sense the difference. The motor response was a tiny shade off what it had been when we were outside Miriam's body.

"Ex-peri-ment." I released my hold on the other two, then deliberately reduced motor inputs within my simulacrum to absolute zero.

I should now be floating like a dead leaf in the arterial tide, carried wherever the blood flow wanted to take me. But I was not. Not quite. There was a tiny added vector to my motion, produced by faint body impulses that I was not creating. I was angling over to the left, away from the broad mainstream of blood flow. When the artery divided, as it would shortly do, I would be channeled into the left branch.

Tom Abernathy and Belinda Lee were following, not knowing what else to do. I restored motor control to my simulacrum, and noted again the difference between my directive and the unit's response. Slight, but not so slight as before.

"Mov-ing," said Belinda's faltering and attenuated voice. She was noticing it too, and she was frightened. That was good. I did not want anyone on my hunts who was not scared by the inexplicable. The force did not feel external, either. It was arising from *within,* a phantom hand affecting our control over the simulacra.

"Stay." I halted, and laboriously sent my instruction. "I—go—on. You wait—for me." I believed we were surely heading for the missing nanodocs, and just as surely it might be dangerous for all to travel together. If I did not return, Abernathy and Lee could find their way to the left or right jugular vein exit points. Equipment was waiting there to sense, capture, and remove from Miriam's body any returning nanodoc units.

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I again reduced motor inputs and allowed myself to drift with the arterial flow. Soon the channel branched and branched again, into ever-finer blood vessels. I had no idea where I was, or where I was going, but I had no doubt about my ability to return to the safe highway of the jugular veins. Every road led there. All I had to do was follow the arrow of the blood, down into the finest capillary level, then on to the fine veins that merged and coupled to carry their oxygen-depleted flow back toward heart and lungs.

And while I was filled with that comforting thought, I noticed that the motion of my simulacrum was changing. Without input from me the left and right sets of legs were twitching in an asynchronous pattern. Their movement added a crab-like sideways component to my forward progress. Soon my nanodoc was squeezing against the wall of the blood vessel. It pressed harder, and finally broke through into a narrow chamber filled with clear cerebrospinal fluid.

I thought that might signal the end of the disturbance, but after a few seconds it began again. Every thresh of the side limbs made the anomaly more obvious. I restored motor control and willed the leg movements to stop. They slowed, but they went on. My simulacrum was turning round and round, carried along in the colorless liquid of the new aqueduct until suddenly it was discharged into a larger space. After a moment of linear motion we started to spin around the vortex of an invisible whirlpool.

I had arrived in one of the larger cerebral *sulci*, the fissures that run along and through the human brain. Tom Abernathy could undoubtedly have told me which one. For the moment, though, I did not care. I had found the missing nanodocs.

They extended along the fissure, visible in the watery fluid as far as my crude optical sensors could see. Each one appeared to be intact. And each was obsessively turning on its own individual carousel, always moving yet never leaving the main chamber of the *sulcus*.

It took thirty seconds of experiment to discover that I too was trapped. I could think commands as well as ever. The simulacrum would start to respond. And before the movement was completed another component would reinforce my instruction. The result was like an intention tremor, a sequence of over-corrections that swung me into more and more violent and uncontrolled motion.

I dared not allow that to continue—I was deep in the delicate fabric of Miriam's brain, where even light contact could cause damage. The only way I could stop the spinning in random directions was to inhibit the motor control of my nanodoc unit. Then we returned to a smooth but useless cyclic motion around an invisible axis.

There was no way to signal the other nanodocs except through gestures. Designed to be worked as a group by a single operator, they were

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of a more primitive design than the unit I inhabited. I tried to make physical contact with one, but I was balked by its movement. Each unit remained locked in its own strange orbit, endlessly rotating but never advancing within the fissure's great Sargasso Sea of cerebrospinal fluid.

I was ready to try something new when I experienced my worst moment so far. In among the hundreds of nanodoc units I saw one different from the rest. But it was identical to my own; therefore it must belong to Tom Abernathy or Belinda Lee. A few seconds later I saw the other. Somehow they had been unable to follow my instructions. Like me they had been carried willy-nilly to this dark interior sea. Like me, they would be trying to assert control. And failing.

I knew how they must feel. The whole success of *Adestis* depends on the power of the mental link. When you are in *Adestis* mode you do not *control* a simulacrum, you *are* the simulacrum. Its limbs and body and environment become your own. Its dangers are yours, its pain is your pain. If it is poisoned by a prey, it dies—and you experience all the agony.

Without that total transfer, *Adestis* would be nothing but a trivial diversion. No one would pay large sums to go on a Small Game Hunt.

That same total immersion of self had been carried over, by design, into the nanodocs. I knew how helpless Tom Abernathy and Belinda Lee would be feeling now. They could not control their spinning simulacra, nor could they escape to or even recall the existence of their own bodies, *outside* the world of the nanodocs.

I knew that all too well; because three years ago Miriam Pearce and I had been in the same situation.

Our quarry was a first-time prey for both us and Adestis. *No one had ever before hunted* Scolopendra. *Although Miriam and I knew it as one of the fastest and most ferocious of the centipedes, we started out in excellent spirits. Why should we not? We had hunted together half a dozen times before, and knew we were an excellent team. Shared danger only seemed to draw us closer.*

And after it was over we planned to hold our own private post-hunt party.

Scolopendra *came flickering across the ground toward us, body undulating and the twenty pairs of legs a blur. I took little notice of those. My attention was on the poison claws on each side of the head, the pointed spears designed to seize an unlucky prey and inject their venom. Between the claws I saw the dark slit of a wide mouth. It was big enough to swallow me whole.*

We had agreed on the strategy before we entered Adestis *mode: Divide and conquer. Each of us would concentrate on one side of the centipede. As it turned toward one of us, the other would sever legs and attack the*

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other side of the body. The animal would be forced to swing around or topple over. And the process would be repeated on the other side.

But why were we hunting at all? Although we found the danger stimulating, neither Miriam nor I had a taste for blood sports for their own sake. As usual on our hunts, we wanted to refine a new piece of Adestis *control technology. When it was perfected it would find a home in the world of the nanodocs.*

The centipede picked me as its first choice of prey. It turned, and Miriam disappeared behind the long, segmented trunk. I caught a glimpse of jointed limbs—each one nearly as long as my body—then the antennae were sweeping down toward me and the poison claws reached out.

Scolopendra *was even faster than we had realized. I heard the crack of Miriam's weapon, but any damage she might inflict would be too late to save me. I could not escape the poison claws by moving backward. All I could do was go closer, jumping in past the claws to the lip of the maw itself.*

It was ready. A pair of maxilla moved forward, to sweep me into the digestive tube.

I had never before hunted a prey able to swallow a victim whole. And I had never until that moment known the strength of my own claustrophobia.

I crouched on the lower lip of the maw, and thought of absorption into the dark interior of the body cavity. I could not bear it.

I threw myself backward and fell to the ground. A suicidal movement, with the poison claws waiting. I did not care. Anything *was better than being swallowed alive.*

The claws approached me. Shuddered. And pulled back. The antenna and the wide head turned.

Miriam's shots were doing their job. I sprawled full-length, peered under the body, and saw half a dozen severed legs in spasm on the ground.

Now it was my turn to shoot. I did it—halfheartedly. I dreaded the broad head swinging back, the mandibles poised to ingest me.

And it was ready to happen. I had shot off two legs. The body was shaking, beginning to turn again in my direction.

I stopped firing. For one second I stood while the centipede hesitated, unable to decide if I or Miriam provided the greater threat. The head turned once more to her side.

Then I was running away, a blind dash across dark and uneven ground. I did not look back.

I left Miriam behind, to die in agony in Scolopendra's *poison claws.*

Three years, three bitter years of remorse and analysis and self-loathing; in three years I had learned something that maybe no other *Adestis*

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operator had ever known. If I had known it *then,* it might have saved Miriam.

The body of the nanodoc, shell-like back and eight multipurpose legs, was *my* body. I had no other. As I gyrated in the brain *sulcus* along with Tom and Belinda and a couple of hundred other units, I turned off every input sensor.

I *imagined* an alien body, a body nothing like my own. A strange body with a well-defined head and slender neck, with two legs, with two jointed arms that ended in delicate manipulators. When the imagined body image was complete I took those two phantom arms and moved them to the sides of the head, just above a strange pair of external hearing organs.

I grasped. And lifted. And reeled with vertigo, as the whole *Adestis* telemetry headset that maintained my link with the nanodoc ripped away from my skull.

I leaned forward and placed my forehead on the bench in front of me. Of all the warnings that I gave to attendants in *Adestis* control rooms, none was stronger than this: *Never,* in any circumstances, rupture the electronic union between player and simulacrum.

Hospital staff were hurrying across to me. I waved them away. The nausea would pass, and I had work to do. I understood what had happened to Miriam. I knew what had happened to me, and what was happening now to Tom Abernathy and Belinda Lee. Unless I was too slow and stupid, I could end it.

The control system for *Adestis,* and for all its applications such as the nanodocs, has built-in safeguards. I opened the main cabinet, found the right circuits, and inhibited them. I turned the electronic gain for my own unit far past the danger point. Then I went back to my seat.

"Tell the technicians with Dr. Pearce to watch for us coming out," I said. "Maybe fifteen minutes from now."

And cross your fingers.

I took a deep breath, gritted my teeth, and crammed the control headset back on.

The pain and dizziness of returning were even worse than going out. I was again a nanodoc, but the overloaded input circuits were a great discordant shout inside my head. Every move that I wanted to make produced a result ten times as violent as I intended. I allowed myself half a minute of practice, learning a revised protocol. The interference that had kept me helpless before was still there—I could feel a pulling to one side—but now it was a nuisance rather than a danger.

First I steered myself across to Belinda Lee's nanodoc. As I suspected, her loss of control included loss of signals. She could not talk to me, and she probably could not hear me. I simply took her by the legs on one side, and dragged her across to where Tom Abernathy was drifting around in

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endless circles. I linked the two units together, right four legs to left four legs, and locked them.

After that it was a purely mechanical task. I proceeded steadily along the brain fissure, systematically catching the nanodocs and linking them by four of their legs to the next unit in the train. The final result was itself something like a very long and narrow centipede, with over two hundred body segments. When I was sure that I had captured every nanodoc I positioned myself at the head of the file, attached four legs to Belinda's free limbs, and looked for the way out.

I had seen it as too simple. *Follow the direction of the blood.* But we were in one of the major *sulci,* where in a healthy human there must be no blood. (As I learned later, blood cells in the cerebrospinal fluid is one sign of major problems in the brain.)

Where were the signposts? I pondered that, as our caravan of nanodoc units set out through one of the most complex objects in the universe: the human brain. We went on forever, through regions corresponding to nothing that Tom Abernathy had described to me. Finally I came across the rubbery wall of a major blood vessel.

Artery or vein? The former would merely carry us back into the brain. The latter would mean we were on our way out.

I entered, and pulled the whole train through after me. But still I did not know where we were heading, until the channel in which we rode joined another of rather greater width. Then I could relax. We were descending the tree, all of whose branches would merge into the broad trunk of the jugular.

I knew it when we at last entered that great vein; knew it when we were removed from the body, all at once, in the swirl of suction from a syringe.

The return to our own bodies under technician control was—as it should be—steady and gentle. I blinked awake, and found Tom Abernathy already conscious and staring at me.

I grinned. He looked away.

My hatred of him had dissolved after shared danger. Apparently his disdain for me persisted. I glanced the other way, at Belinda Lee. And found that she, like Tom Abernathy, would not meet my eye.

"We did it," I said. I couldn't stop smiling. "They're all out. I bet Miriam recovers consciousness in just a few minutes."

"*We* didn't do anything," Belinda said. "*You* did it all. I was useless."

I couldn't see it that way. But her reaction seemed too strong to be pure wounded ego.

"I couldn't have done anything without your help," I said. "Hey, without you two I'd never even have found my way *into* the brain."

"You don't understand." Tom Abernathy's face was pale, and his voice

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was as sour as Belinda's. "I know how she feels, even if you don't. Because I'm the same. We're not like you, with your crazy *Adestis* heroics. I wasn't just useless and helpless in there, I was *scared* when I lost nanodoc control. Too frightened even to follow what you were doing. Too terrified to *try* to help Miriam."

I laughed. Not with humor. The irony of Clancy Fletcher as heroic savior for Miriam Pearce was too much to take.

"It's not courage," I said. "It's only experience."

And then, when they stared at me with no comprehension, it all spilled out. I had bottled it up for too long, and it *hurt* to talk. But I could feel no worse about myself no matter what they knew, and perhaps a knowledge of other cowardice would help them to deal with what they thought of as their own failure.

"But there's a bright side," I said as I concluded. "If I hadn't failed Miriam then, I would never have experimented later with forced interruption of *Adestis* mode. And we'd still be inside Miriam's brain.

"I've never told anyone this before. But now you understand why she won't talk to me after she recovers consciousness."

They had listened to my outpourings in an oddly silent setting. As soon as they were sure that we were all right the nanodoc technicians had hurried off to the next room, where Miriam Pearce was reported to be showing a change of condition. The only sound in the room where we sat was the occasional soft beep of nanodoc monitors, reporting inactive status.

"I'm sorry to hear all that." Tom Abernathy's sincerity was real. Rumpled and sweaty, he was no longer the elegant physician with the polished bedside manner. "Miriam won't talk to you?"

He ought to know that, if anyone did.

"Not for years."

"Strange. Doesn't sound like the Miriam Pearce that I know."

"Nor me," said Belinda. "She's nice to everybody. But when are you going to tell us what was going on in there? I try to pass myself off as somebody who knows nanodocs, and I can't even *understand* what you did, let alone do it myself."

"It was no big deal. It all depends on one simple fact. As soon as you know that, you'll be able to work everything else out for yourself. The key factor is *interference effects*. The electrical currents that control an *Adestis* module—including a nanodoc—"

I was interrupted by a technician hurrying through from the next room. "Dr. Abernathy. We think Dr. Pearce is waking up."

I was first through the door. Miriam's condition was clearly different—she was stirring restlessly on the bed—but her eyes were closed. Before I could get to the bedside Tom Abernathy had pushed me aside and was checking the monitors.

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"Looks a hell of a lot better." He leaned right over Miriam, and was inches from her face when her eyes flickered open.

"I knew you would." The faint thread of sound would not have been heard, had not everyone in the room frozen to absolute stillness. "I knew you'd come and save me."

Her mouth and eyes were smiling up—at Tom Abernathy. Then the smile faded, she sighed, and her eyes closed again in total weariness.

I blundered out of the room more by feel than sight. Company was the last thing I wanted, but Belinda followed me.

"You can't leave it like that," she said. "What *about* electrical currents?"

She wanted to talk. Well, why not? What did it matter? What did anything matter?

"The electrical currents that are *sent* to an *Adestis* unit are a few milliwatts," I said. "But the ones that are received at the unit, and the magnetic fields they generate, are orders of magnitude smaller than that. They're minute—and almost exactly the size of the fields and currents within the human brain. When Miriam sent nanodocs *into her own brain,* they were subject to two different sets of inputs, one arriving fractionally later than the other. In her case that set up a resonance which left both her brain and the nanodocs incapable of functioning normally. She was trapped. Maybe she even knew that she was trapped.

"In our case it worked differently. Her brain currents *interfered* with our nanodoc operation, so we lost control, but there was no resonance and no loss of consciousness.

"All I did was break out of *Adestis* mode and re-set the input currents to the highest level on my unit. When I went back in there was still a disturbance from Miriam, but it was one small enough for me to be able to handle."

Belinda was nodding, but she was beginning to stare at the door to the next room. "You know, Tom has to hear this, too."

"He'll hear it. Just now he has other things on his mind."

I don't know how I sounded, but it was enough to earn Belinda Lee's full attention. "What *is it* with you and Tom? I thought you hadn't even met until today."

"You really don't know? I'd have expected it to be the talk of the hospital." And then, when she gaped at me, "Miriam Pearce and Tom Abernathy"—he had opened the door and was walking into the room, but it was too late to stop—"are lovers."

"*Tom* and Miriam Pearce." Belinda exploded. "Over my dead body —and over his, if it's ever true."

She rushed to his side and grabbed him possessively by the arm. "He's *mine.* He's *my* lover, and no one else's."

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Abernathy must have wondered what he had walked into. Whatever it was, he didn't care for it. "My God, Belinda! You know what we agreed. Shout it out, so the whole hospital hears you." He actually blushed when he looked at me, something I had not seen on a mature male for a long time. And then his expression slowly changed, to an odd mixture of satisfaction and defiant pride.

"It's *his* fault." She was pointing at me. "He told me that you and Miriam Pearce are lovers!"

"Miriam and *me*? No way! Honest, Belinda, there's nothing between us—there never has been."

"I hope not. But I know she doesn't have a man of her own." Belinda was persuaded. Almost. "And she did say to you, 'I knew you'd come and save me.' "

"To *me*? What a joke that'd be! I was as much use inside her head as a dead duck. She wasn't talking to me, she was talking to *him*. She said his name, Clancy, right after you two left. I came out here to get him."

"She *doesn't* have a man—doesn't have a lover?" That was me, not Belinda. Shock slows comprehension.

"Not any more. She once told me she had some guy, years ago, but he dumped her. Her family did something terrible to him. He wouldn't see her, didn't answer phone calls. In the end she just gave up."

"I thought a Pearce family member could get absolutely anything." That was Belinda, too cynical for her years.

Tom Abernathy patted her arm. With their secret out, his attitude was changing. "Almost anything. Miriam told me that a billionairess can have any man in the world. Except the one she wants."

"Does she want *you*?" Belinda had to be sure. But long-suffering Tom Abernathy was spared the need to offer that reassurance, because again one of the hospital staff came running through from the other room.

"Dr. Abernathy," he said. "She's finally waking up. *Really* waking up this time."

Tom and Belinda hurried away. I followed, more slowly.

Finally waking up. *Really* waking up. If only that had happened years ago, before it was too late.

I walked to the open door. Tom Abernathy was at the bedside. Miriam was sitting up, pale blue eyes wide open and searching. I stood rooted on the threshold. Belinda Lee was coming toward me, suddenly knowing, one hand raised.

I forgot how to breathe.

Sleeping Beauty slept for a whole century, and that still worked out fine.

Perhaps for some things it is never too late. ●

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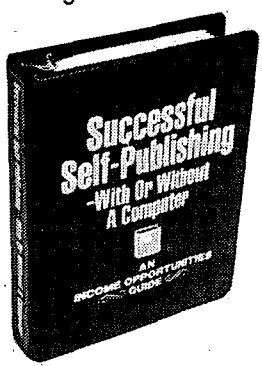

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LOVE WALKED IN

by Diane Mapes

Diane Mapes has been a strawberry picker, a parks department secretary, a typesetter, a paste-up artist, and a magazine editor. A 1988 graduate of Clarion West, she is now a full-time author whose work has appeared in *Argos Fantasy and Science Fiction, On Spec, Northwest Writer*, and the Washington *Post*. "Love Walked In" is her first story for *IAsfm*.

I was just about to put the corn muffins in the oven when Love knocked on the door. I knew it was him because he said his name was Eddie and he wanted to use my phone.

Love was always acting sneaky like that, always making up stories about busted gas mains or grocery carts with wobbly right front wheels; Love never could come right out in the open and tell you what was what. But I was wise to him this time, I told myself, opening the door for the short husky blond with the slightly crooked nose. I was learning about Love all right and I wasn't about to get caught unawares *this* time, no sirree.

"You don't fool me, Love," I said, ushering "Eddie" into the apartment. I wanted to get things out in the open right away, let him know who was in charge. "You may think you have, but I'm on to you in a big way." I wagged a finger at him and tried to look like Lauren Bacall in *To Have And Have Not*. "A big way."

Love gave an adorable self-conscious shrug. He was nothing if not an artist. "I know it must sound awful dumb," he said, scuffing his sneaker against my worn braided rug. "But I really did bust my alternator on my way to the emissions test and if I don't call my boss and tell him, he's gonna kill me."

"Uh huh," I said, folding my arms across my chest. Love's excuses had gotten flimsier with each outing—last week it had been the man from cable TV checking up to see if I had more than one box when I didn't

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even have cable TV at all; today it was this guy walking up three flights of stairs just to use my telephone when there was a booth right outside the building. "The phone's over there," I said, pointing to my desk. "Right next to the computer. It hasn't moved."

"Thanks," said "Eddie," throwing me a look that was supposed to let me know that I was acting awfully strange for ten thirty in the morning, even more strange than you could expect from a woman with a pencil through her hair and strings of perf completely covering her apartment. I pondered my nails and counted to ten as Love pretended to dial his number at work. I didn't notice how "Eddie" looked in his button-fly Levi jeans and taut cotton T-shirt or how he smelled, all Old Spice and black leather, when he brushed past me, or how his eyes looked like two blue pieces of sky with little black suns embedded in them. I pondered my nails and didn't notice those things at all. Love had hardened me to the mere physicalities of life, yes sirree. I was a rock.

"All done, then?" I asked as he hung up. It made me nervous having Love so close, especially so soon after his last lethal visit. "You'll just be on your way?"

Love hung his head, and I knew I was in for a tougher ride than I'd anticipated. "My boss just fired me," he said, all wounded puppy-dog eyes and vulnerable mouth and chin. "He told me that I'd missed one too many times and that was that."

"That was that," I said, blinding myself to "Eddie's" slightly flushed cheeks and the kiss of a mustache on his soft upper lip. "Well, I'm awful sorry to hear about you losing your job," I said, nudging Love over towards the door. "But I'm sure something will turn up soon. Valentine's Day *is* just around the corner. I know how busy you are then."

"Eddie" gave me another puzzled look, meant to convince me that I was acting a fool, but I'd been fooled too many times before by that sneaky old scoundrel.

"Well, thanks for letting me use your telephone . . ." He let the sentence dangle helplessly out there in the middle of the air, trying to get me to fill in my name, but I refused. I was stubborn when it came to endearing little details like names, addresses, lingerie sizes. The last time Love had walked in, it had taken him three weeks just to get my phone number.

"Better luck next time," I said, and slammed the door in Love's face. Leaning against it, I took several deep breaths to recover. It had been close that time. Love hadn't tried blue-sky eyes and the smell of black leather before. I turned and deadbolted the door, then went on out to the kitchen, anxiety already setting in.

Maybe if I was wising up, Love was wising up, too, I thought. Maybe

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it wasn't just going to be a skirmish between me and the amorous anaconda this time, maybe it was going to be all-out war. I swallowed hard, thinking about the arsenal Love had at his hands—the words, the gestures, the little bouquets of African violets on the doorstep, the spaghetti dinners at his place, the poetry. I shuddered, trying not to think of the poetry.

The corn muffins were right where I left them, gloppy and yellow and raw as my nerves. I hated corn muffins even before Love wandered by the last time, at the Suzzallo Library, when his name had been Gustav. He'd been a music major then, a dark brooding Austrian who needed help vith his English and vould I mind going over his term paper vith him, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* it vas and he vould gladly pay me for my trouble, vould $10 an hour be sufficient?

I had hated corn muffins then, and I hated corn muffins now, but I knew that if I was going to sit around my apartment stuffing my face because of a broken heart, it damn well better be with something I didn't like or else I'd end up looking like the Before Women in *TV Guide*. The last time Love had sauntered in and out of my life, I had assuaged the pain with cream puffs, and I hadn't been able to face a carton of Half and Half since. I'd always liked Half and Half in my morning coffee and damn well missed it. I wasn't about to make the same mistake twice.

Gustav. Ha. I should have known better then, but I'd gotten cocky, going a whole three months without a broken heart, and besides, I really hadn't quite figured out Love's game then. I still thought it was coincidence that every time I fell in love, it was with somebody who abruptly decided to go back to college, or suddenly remembered that they were married, or some jerk who, out of the blue, tells me we would make much better friends than lovers. Oh, did I say I was in love with you? I meant I loved you, you know, the way a man loves his sister or a particularly close co-worker, and there's a world of difference between the two, a world of difference, my very good friend.

Gustav, ha. Eddie, ha. It was Love, all right. Always Love. He just wore a mask, a disguise, a husk that was somebody else's body, just like Death did in that *Twilight Zone* episode with Robert Redford, always scratching at your door, trying to get you to let him in so he could worm his way into your confidence and into your heart, only Love didn't kill you, at least not overtly, at least not all at once. Love just made you swoon when you saw people with sandy brown hair and black watch caps, love made you run into walls in broad daylight or forget to call your mother on her birthday, love made you do all kinds of stupid, insipid things like write bad haiku about strawberries and silverfish and give all your money to transients with $50 haircuts. Love did *all* that, before it twisted a knife into your guts again and again and again.

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The bell on the oven went off and I pulled the corn muffins out, this time without burning my fingers, which I'd had a tendency to do ever since Gustav had left to go back to Austria to be with his Hilda (Oh, did I not mention my Hilda, ja, she's a fine girl, ve've been engaged since ve vere both very little, here is her picture, now look, you have torn it, vhy vould you do such a thing to my Hilda?).

I settled the pan of muffins on top of the stove and stared at them, wondering how it was that a man could have hair the same color as a corn muffin, trying to remember that it *wasn't* a man at all, it was just that sneaky son of a bitch Love doing a number on me again, it was just Love conjuring up another trick from that big old thick black book of his. Trying to remember how I had promised myself that he would never pull the wool over my eyes again (or the black leather or that taut tan T-shirt), that I was going to be tough and resolute and firm (as firm as that jaw, or those biceps beneath that taut tan T-shirt) and that I didn't need Love anyway, so there (and there and there, and yes, what would it have been like to put my hand *there*?). Trying to remember all those things because it was so essential to remember those things or else everything would get all screwed up again. *All screwed up.*

Eddie called the next day.

"How did you get my phone number?" I asked, gnawing on a cold corn muffin.

"It was on your phone, silly," he said, laughing in a low silky way that made me want to hang up the phone and yank out the cord and throw the whole damn mechanism out the window for good. For good, do you hear me? for *good*, so he wouldn't be calling me ever again, not late at night when I was lying in bed with only a stuffed giraffe and a basketful of dirty clothes for company, not early in the morning when I was sitting at my keyboard waiting for inspiration to strike, yank the phone right out of the wall so he wouldn't call me up ever, ever, ever.

And then he laughed again.

Love always had a good laugh, always seemed to have the last laugh, too, but I was wise to him this time, I was. I was wise and I was smart and I was going to play it cool. No yanking, no crying, nothing to tip him off that I was running scared or that he was getting to me in the least little bit. I was just going to be cool. A sphinx, a statue, a veritable ice princess with corn muffin crumbs all down the front of her pink flannel nightgown.

"So, you want to go to the beach?" Eddie asked, and I choked on a big chunk of butter.

"The beach? Are you crazy? It's February."

"I know that," he said, his lazy Alabama drawl telling me that he was leaning back in his old leather office chair, the same kind of chair that

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Humphrey Bogart used to sit in when he was checking out Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon*. I knew that's what it was, because Love was a sentimental sort, and he'd have a chair like that, just because that was the kind of chair that *I* liked, and even *had*, and he'd know that, he *always* knew those things about me, that's just how Love was.

"I love the beach in the winter," he said, his voice as supple as that worn red leather. "I love the waves and the wind and the birds. You'll love it, too. I know you will. So you want to go?" His voice was as soft as the blue serge suit Sam Spade always wore, as sinuous as the trail of smoke drifting up from Brigid O'Shaughnessy's lipstick-stained cigarette, as sweet, as smooth, as seductive, as the prospect of a lazy beach afternoon with a short husky blonde with a slightly crooked nose (and those *eyes*, damn those eyes, Love *would* have to use those eyes).

"No," I said, and hung up, running into the kitchen and gathering up all the corn muffins. There were four of them, and they made four satisfying little *whumps* as they hit the bottom of the garbage sack, so satisfying that I went through all the cupboards next, grabbing the golden maple syrup and the sack of masa flour and then the butter and the bananas and the tortillas and the Waverly Wafers and the corn from the refrigerator with the silky tufts peeking out from the top like his hair, damn Love and his silky golden blond hair.

I threw them all into the garbage, one after the other, and then I went into the living room and put on an old Elvis album and listened to *Heartbreak Hotel* until I stopped shaking and stopped thinking about walking along in the nippy winter wind of the beach, listening to the cries of the gulls along the bluff and the water slapping the shore as gentle as a lover slapping my thigh, thinking about all the men I had loved, all the men who had all been the same, only I hadn't known it; I listened to the album until all thoughts of the beach were gone, all yearnings for the sand and the wind and his warm arm around me had been obliterated completely, as completely as Gustav's picture had been after I tore it into bits and burned it with stiff wooden kitchen matches (the kind an Austrian hausfrau might use to light her husband's pipe, for instance) and stuffed it down the garbage disposal, until I no longer thought wistful thoughts about scuffing along the beach, my hand tucked inside the pocket of his leather jacket, tucked inside his warm firm fingers, my hand tucked in his as sure as if it were my heart and it *is*, oh, it is, oh, it always, always is.

I sat in my red leather chair in the dark hollow of the early morning and listened to Elvis and cried, and wondered if there was any way that I could make myself breakfast without using any yellow ingredients at all.

Eddie called again that night.

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"Stop bothering me, Love," I said, deciding to take an assertive approach. "I don't want you, I don't need you. You're only trying to hurt me, and you can't anymore, so please leave me alone."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Love said, his voice calm and sure. The Alabama drawl was barely perceptible now, as if he knew I'd be listening for it, straining for that particular variety of Tuscaloosa carrot, as if he knew I liked a man with an interesting voice, which of course he *did*; after all, he had concocted Robert's clipped British accent because I loved old Ronald Colman movies and John's sly Wyoming patter because I loved Westerns, too, and he had even come up with that clunky European speech that Gustav used because he knew I was also a sucker for the Continental type.

"Of course, there's nothing to be afraid of," I said, systematically tearing threads out of the afghan that now covered my red leather chair. "Why should I be afraid? Why should I be the least bit afraid? It's not like I care for you at all. It's not like I'll ever care for anyone ever again. I'm above all that, you know. I'm immune. Do you hear me? *Immune.* I'm a sphinx, a statue, an ice princess. Do you hear me? I'm an ice princess!"

"Of course you are," Love said, and sighed. It was a deep regretful sigh. The kind of sigh that meant that Love really was sorry if any harm had come to me at all and that he really had had only my best interests at heart all along, that he only wanted to make me smile and laugh and enjoy those African violets, as delicate as they were, and the spaghetti dinners over at his house (sometimes with Italian sausage, sometimes strictly vegetarian, sometimes spaghetti that we didn't even touch because we'd end up in bed before the noodles were even on the stove). A heavy hurtful sigh that told me he really thought I'd *liked* the slim volumes of Emily Dickinson poetry and the discreet bottles of airport perfume sent on his way back from the Republican Convention, and it wasn't *his* fault if he was married.

"Just quit bothering me," I said and hung up, wishing that I hadn't told Love quite so much about how I felt, but knowing that that's how things were with Love, he never did play fair, he always made you talk—that even when you started out being careful and closemouthed, sooner or later you'd spill your guts about *everything*, and he'd find out about that chocolate egg you stole from the drug store when you were eleven.

The phone rang then and I let it ring, knowing that it was Love at the other end, Love trying to work his way under my skin, which I told myself he had not done, after all it wasn't like I'd gone out with him, not to coffee, or to the movies, and certainly not to the beach (the beach, the beach, with the wind whispering through his curly blonde hair and

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throwing sand into his eyes so he'd have to stop and dab at his long delicate lashes with a hankie, dab at the golden honey tears which I would take home and press against my cheek all through the night, wondering if he'd call in the morning or ever ever again).

It wasn't like I had done anything like *that* at all.

Love called again the next day. This time, he wanted to come over.

"I've got a lot of free time now," he said, his voice not nearly as small and squawky as I'd hoped it would sound by setting the telephone receiver on the table and staring it down like it was a snake, a cobra ready to strike. "And I want to get to know you. Is there any harm in that?"

"No!" I shouted down at the telephone. "No harm at all. Except just don't ask me to wear that blue dress that you always liked, because I burned it. Do you hear me? I burned it three years ago. It's in a barrel down at the dump, along with all of your pictures, and that stupid stuffed panda bear you won for me at the Evergreen State Fair, and all that damn awful poetry."

"You don't need to wear any blue dresses," Love said softly. "You don't need to wear anything at all." He laughed again, an embarrassed laugh, oh, a very cleverly manufactured embarrassed laugh, meant to assure me that he hadn't *really* meant anything sexual by that at all, that he was just trying to be sincere, but because of his ardor and his nerves (oh Love was such a nervous sort, not calculating at all, just so helpless and fumbling and so gosh-darn-aw-shucks vulnerable) the words just came out wrong.

"I'm stronger this time," I said, laying my head down on the table, cradling it in my arms and wishing that I didn't always cry when I got angry because it couldn't be anything but anger, after all, I was a sphinx, a statue, an ice princess, and ice princesses didn't get their hearts broken, and ice princesses certainly never cried. "I'm strong and I'm firm and I'm resolute," I mumbled. "I'm strong and I'm firm and I'm resolute."

"I'll be there in an hour," Love said, and I wiped a tear away from my eyes and looked down into it, seeing my shaky convex reflection, an intense brunette with hair badly in need of mussing. Maybe I was taking the wrong approach, I told myself, maybe I needed Love after all, maybe not a lot of Love, but just a little Love. Maybe we could just chat, just test the water. Maybe there was some kind of compromise Love and I could work out. That was it, a comprómise. I would wear a coat, a big long heavy winter coat with seventy-five thick wooden buttons up to the collar and down to the ankles, a coat that I could keep buttoned up to keep me warm without any need for an arm around my shoulder or a black leather jacket across my back, a coat that I would keep closed always to keep my heart covered so it couldn't be touched, or teased, or

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snuck up on, because you always had to watch out for Love sneaking up on you, he was one sneaky son of a bitch.

"See you in an hour then?" Love asked, his voice expectant, excited, his voice trembling at the thought of joining in the game again, of taking up the dance, of touching and teasing and sneaking.

"No!" I screamed, regaining my senses. "I'll never see you, never! I've had it with you, Love. You're through, do you understand? Through!" I hung up the phone and unplugged it from the wall and put it in the closet, and put a chair in front of the closet with a box of old books on top of the chair and the afghan on top of the box of books, and then I sat and stared at the mess and decided what I really needed to do was clean out the dust balls from underneath the loveseat.

I started cleaning then, dust balls from underneath the loveseat, rust stains from around the kitchen sink, cobwebs from on top of the picture frames and doorjambs, and finally ended up washing out my lingerie, one piece at a time, all the while wondering why it was I even *had* lingerie like that. It certainly didn't seem right to wear black lace teddies underneath pink flannel nightgowns, and it wasn't like I was going to wear them just for myself, they only reminded me of Robert, who liked black, in fact, he'd liked it so much he went off to study film noir at USC. Nobody else was ever going to see them (the black lace teddies, not Robert's films), so why *was* it exactly that I stood there washing them out, why didn't I just throw them out instead, and why exactly *did* they call it a loveseat anyway? It wasn't like if two people sat next to each other in it that they would automatically fall in love and stay in love. People never stayed in love, did they? I mean, people on some of the TV shows did, people like June and Ward and Barney and Betty, and sometimes people you met in real life had been married for 44 years, but they usually didn't love each other, they usually just mutually ignored each other, so why was it so important for people to fall in love, wasn't it better that people just learned to love *themselves*, and in *that* case why did they even *make* loveseats, why didn't they just make chairs?

That line of questioning left me nervous, and not a little exhausted, so I went back out to the living room and took down the afghan and the box of books and the chair in front of the closet door to make sure the phone was still there, and it was. And just to make sure that Love hadn't thrown a monkey wrench into the works by having the phone go out of order so a tall lanky serviceman with a black watch cap and perfect teeth would have to come out and fix it and start asking me questions about what was my name and was I really a freelance writer and gee, would I like to go see *Casablanca* this Friday, I can tell you love old movies, just look at all those posters, I plugged it into the wall, and it rang.

And it was him.

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"I've got to see you," Love said and his Alabama drawl was all but drowned out by misery. Love sounded serious this time, despondent, as if I had somehow hurt him, as if he were growing weak and dying on the vine. As if Love were a grape, growing withered and sour, a grape resting in an overlooked clump in the hot afternoon sun, a musky drying bit of fruit just begging for a chance to sweeten somebody's lips.

"I told you, Love," I said, settling onto the loveseat, dangling my legs over the side and staring through the open bathroom door at the black lace hanging on the towel racks. "I told you that I'd had it with you, that I'd sworn off of you for good."

"You can't mean that," he said and I heard a catch in his voice as if he were trying to keep from crying, as if I had actually turned the tables on him and twisted a knife into *his* guts again and again and again, as if Love were a feeling, caring person instead of just a fickle emotion, as if Love were just like me. "Please," he said, "you just can't mean that."

"But you've left me no choice," I said, staring in at the black lace lingerie and wondering how long it actually took for lingerie to dry, especially when I had a hair dryer that I could use if I really wanted to, if, say, for some reason I *had* to have it dry within a hour, in case I wanted to put it away in a drawer without getting everything else all damp or in case I wanted to wear it underneath, say, a big long heavy winter coat with seventy-five wooden buttons.

"What you're saying then is that you hate me?" he asked, his honey-gold Alabama drawl lightly caressing my ear like the soft tip of an index finger or a nose or a gentle nibbling mouth. Caressing and teasing and touching and sneaking up.

"Of course I don't hate you," I said, tapping my heels against the side of the loveseat. Chairs were comfortable enough for one person, it was true, but I'd always been the loveseat type, especially if there were a pillow on one end to put my head on, a pillow or something close to it, something soft yet supportive, like, say, a lap. "You know how I feel about you, Love. You know how I've always felt."

"I thought I knew," Love said, his voice very quiet. "But maybe I was just taking things for granted." Love laughed then, that honey-gold silky scrape of a laugh, and I felt bells going off inside, alarm bells and death knells and church bells and sirens, horns and buzzers and rattles and clappers. Wrong way, wrong way, shouted a man with a yellow road sign. Do not enter, dangerous road up ahead, called a flagger in fluorescent orange. I closed my eyes and saw a slippery shoulders sign on the highway up ahead, but the shoulders didn't seem slippery at all, they were firm and solid and covered with a taut tan T-shirt and a black leather jacket, a smooth plump grapeskin of a jacket that held a crumpled piece of bad poetry in one pocket and a bouquet of faded African violets in the

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other. African violets that would probably die, just like love always seemed to die, but violets that were soft and velvety and intoxicatingly sweet nonetheless.

"I can be there in thirty minutes," Love whispered, his low lazy drawl barely audible over the cacophony blaring inside.

"Thirty minutes?" I asked, shutting out the noise with a weary grateful sigh, rolling up the window so the sounds were there but muted, like the sound of a phone ringing from inside a closet or a trumpet playing a soft rendition of "Stardust" in an old '40s roadhouse.

"If it's all right," Love said, his voice a trifle hesitant, a hesitancy that I had long listened for in all his previous incarnations but had never heard until now, a tremulous uncertainty, like a child attempting a diminished chord or a man asking for the hand of a once-abandoned lover.

"You won't be bringing a wife with you?" I asked, my heart beating faster.

"I'm not married," he said.

"Or a girlfriend, then. You know, like Betty. Or Mitzi. Or Hilda."

"No girlfriends," Love told me firmly. "No wives, no girlfriends. Only you."

I closed my eyes and saw patterns of African violets blooming and dying and blooming once again. "How do you feel about film noir?" I asked, and he laughed softly in my ear.

"We can talk about that over dinner. Is it all right now? Is it all right to come over?"

The African violets bloomed yet again and I suddenly recognized them as the ones that had sat in my grandmother's window for thirty years. Fragile things didn't always have to die, I told myself. Not if they were properly nurtured.

"It *is* all right, isn't it?" he asked again, and *I* laughed this time at the insecurity in his voice.

"Yes, Love," I said, wondering just exactly where I *had* put that hair dryer, anyway. "This time, I think it's all right."●

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TO REBECCA CANN AND MARY LEAKEY, THE SEARCH GOES ON:

by Sandra J. Lindow

EVE

On finding a bone in a tin of canned salmon,
She decided to build a dinosaur.
The bone was threaded through a chain
Around her neck and the can, neatly shaped
Into a fair approximation of a mandible.
Her biggest colander became the skull,
Eggbeaters and lipsticks, femurs and phalanges,
Wired together with pipe cleaners.

Despite her distraction, the houseplants
Did not suffer, hearts of Philodendron
And Mother-in-law's Tongue began to thrive,
Assumed a lushness unseen in her house before.
A tricycle wheel became the breastbone.
Old curtain rods and the guest bed mattress
Formed the ribcage. The Lazy Boy Recliner
Produced the joints for the knees.

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About the time she was wiring
A set of lug wrenches into the spine,
The house began to change as well,
Draperies becoming green and ropy,
Light dappling on the wallpaper
As if filtered through enormous leaves.
She found it a pleasant change, she said,
And didn't mind that she couldn't find the garage.

The tail was several dozen Diet Coke cans,
All red and white and silver, tapering
To a tab, promising zero calories,
And the lifelong pursuit of a svelteness
She thought she could do without.
But on attaching the last of them,
She found the master bedroom had gone,
Replaced by a hammock swinging beneath the stars.

By then she'd taken to wearing
A tablecloth knotted into a sarong,
Said the weather was too warm there
For her to wear anything else.
I think she upset the balance of nature,
Building something primal as a dinosaur
Out of all that sleazy man-made stuff.
That's why it took her house—

Took her, too, I guess.
If you go there, she's not home.

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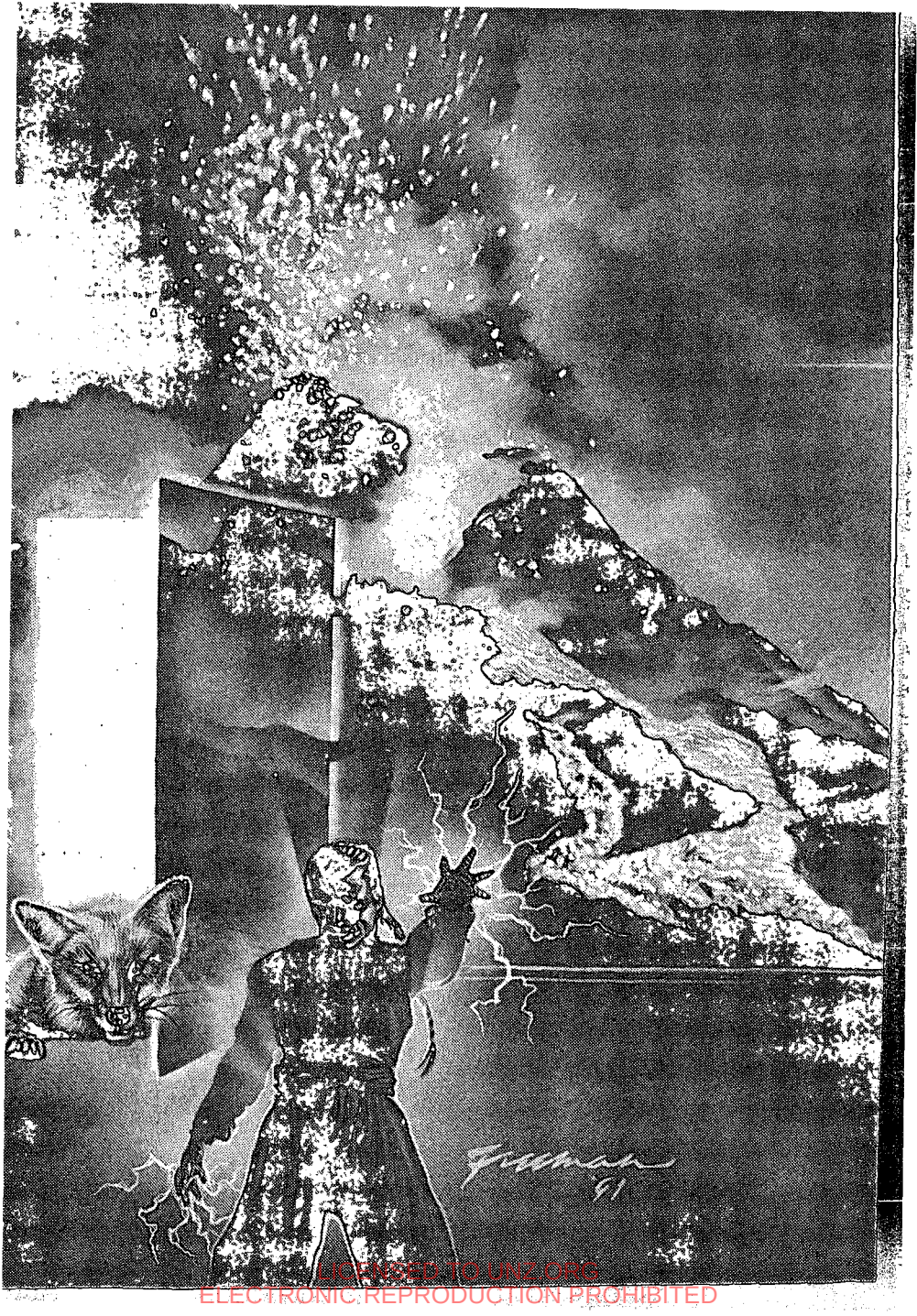

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SYNTHESIS

by Mary Rosenblum

Mary Rosenblum had been planning to write a story about virtual reality, eventually, but once she began exploring the technology she was hooked. She tells us, "It's wonderful, magic new stuff. What struck me most forcibly, however, was that we live in our own virtual realities every day of our lives . . ."

art: Gary Freeman

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Chen raised his arms like a conductor. At his feet, the primordial sea responded, swelling up around the barren crag on which he stood, rich with the potential of life. Sticky, yellowish foam clung to the lava rock, stuck to David's bare feet. His virtual program translated the touch of foam on his palms with low-level electrical stimulation, suggested the damp breeze, but this one was a Net peice. You didn't *smell* the ocean, or feel the damp, briny caress of that breeze.

In a stationary piece, he could add complex sensory input: the cold touch of foam, the tang of the rich sea. He could make this piece *live*. David suppressed a sigh. You had to have a gallery to get a stationary showing. Chen BioSource did very well on the Exchange, but the family firm didn't do well enough that he could afford to put on his own stationary shows. This piece would get its opening on the Net. Tomorrow. That was a big enough triumph, he told himself.

Tomorrow. Tension stirred in David's gut. He had managed to bury that deadline, but now it surfaced, ticking in his brain like an antique clock. He frowned at a plume of volcanic ash twisting across the pale sky. Was it out of balance, or was this just a case of pre-opening jitters? Wind moaned across the sea with the lonely voice of woodwinds, prophesying change. David stretched a virtual arm to tweak at the ash plume. Better. Not a bad prologue, he told himself and counted down; three, two, one, *now*.

The sea heaved, pregnant with life. Creatures writhed, swarmed, coalesced and divided in a frenzied symphony of evolution. David stepped into the troubled sea and let himself sink. The silty water swirled around him, and the sense of motion was vivid enough to make David a little seasick. Good. Nothing for the nit-pickers to bitch about here. He had researched every species, down to the last cell. David climbed back onto his rock, allowing himself to savor a tentative anticipation. *Creation*, he'd called this piece; his biggest to date. And it was . . . good.

Yes, good. All around him, swimming motes grew legs, feeder fronds, fins that became jointed swimming legs. The Earth writhed and shuddered with the spasms of birth and death. Music soared accompaniment as mountain peaks thrust up from the seething water, piercing the yellowish sky. . . . David stiffened as an ominous darkness spread slowly across that sky. It dimmed the sun, cast a threatening shadow across the landscape. A breeze riffled the water, and the suggestion of cold raised goosebumps on David's neck. On the rocky shore, the first hesitant swimmer was flopping and struggling its way into the intertidal zone, gasping with rudimentary lungs.

That wasn't supposed to happen. "Pause," David snapped and the scene froze. "Goddammit!" He searched the motionless landscape of sea swell and breaking waves. "Where the hell are you, *this* time?"

A pointy, canid face peeked at him from behind a thrust of black lava rock. American red fox. *Vulpes fulva*, and you could see every hair ripple in the wind, David thought grudgingly.

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Red-furred, prick-eared, the fox grinned a white, toothy grin. Its green eyes glinted with mischief and it made a very human, very rude noise.

Enough! David stretched out his hand. The pistol appeared in his fist, a vintage western-style revolver with a pearl handle. The fox flicked its white-tipped tail, laughed a boy's laugh, and streaked across the static sea. It vanished into thin air as David fired. For a long moment, he scowled after it. Then he tossed the revolver into the air. It blinked out of existence. "House?" he said. "Did I make contact?"

I'm sorry. House's voice whispered over his audial implant. *The intruder was able to withdraw from the program before the security trace connected.*

David grimaced, a headache nibbling at the back of his brain. He had changed the program entry codes again only yesterday, had thought that he'd seen the last of his pesky ghost for awhile. This piece opened *tomorrow.* Damaged or not. "Eraser," David said between clenched teeth. He snatched the oversized chalkboard-duster from the air and raised his hand to sweep away the fox's added shadow.

But it contributed something to the theme of the piece—a hint of trouble to come. An ominous warning. David tapped his toe on the frozen sea. He frowned at the ancestors of land life, caught in their struggle to crawl up onto the muddy ocean verge. Earth would never be the same again. The shadow . . . fit. Oh hell. "Save," David commanded. When the scene had been safely stored, he wiped away the fox's darkness with sweeping, angry strokes.

Excuse me, the House program interrupted him. *You are due at your father's apartment in one hour.*

David sighed and disappeared the eraser. He wanted more time, wanted to run every moment of this piece through his virtual fingers, reassure himself that his elusive ghost had done no more damage, that texture, shading, and tone were exactly what he had intended.

He did *not* want to meet with his father this evening.

David sighed again. "Store and exit." He closed his eyes against the momentary disorientation of the collapsing virtual.

His virtual lab took shape around him; three by three meters of carpeted walls, floor, ceiling. He stood in the middle of the floor, lanky and naked except for his singlet. The silver threads of his intradermal Kraeger net glittered in the subdued glow of the strip lights, covering every square centimeter of his skin. David wrinkled his nose, smelling his own sour sweat. His hair had come loose from its braid and it stuck to his neck. Resisting the temptation to recall the piece and blame a glitch in his House program for his tardiness, David went to shower and dress.

His father refused to use virtuals. He wouldn't even put on a suit of virtual skinthins, although he had had David netted before birth. Typical, David thought as he hesitated in the atrium outside his father's apartment. His father might detest the technology, but a Kraeger was

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the last word in power dressing in the business world. So Fuchin had had David netted. To benefit the family. "We Chinese are obsessed with family," David murmured. He brushed a nonexistent wrinkle from his tunic, wishing that the old man wasn't so stubbornly intransigent about the technology. He would be much easier to deal with in virtual.

"*Bù yâu,* don't preen for me," his father said when David finally entered the room. He was speaking Mandarin. "Save such actions for a future bride's attention."

Not that subject again. "Hello, Fuchin," David inclined his head stiffly and settled into the indicated chair. His father went in for antique lacquer chairs and a profusion of colored fabrics. Calligraphied scrolls hung on the walls, praising virtue. An antique writing set—ink box, carved jade chop, inkstone, and brushes—was laid out neatly on a carved desk. The antique clutter made David feel claustrophobic. "How are you feeling?" he asked his father. "Shau Jieh told me that you were having trouble sleeping."

"*Ching ni,* speak Mandarin, please. Use English for business. Your youngest sister worries too much." David's father waved his hand. "She is a good daughter." He reached for the porcelain pot on the table at his elbow and poured two cups of pale tea.

His father looked classically southern, David thought. His face might have been lifted from an antique Guangdong scroll. David's own features were more diluted; the product of his mother's mixed caucasian blood. His eldest half-sister, Dà Jieh, liked to remind him of his mother's mixed blood. David's mother had been something of a scandal, a very late and very young second wife. She had given him her own father's name, but David didn't remember much about her. He regarded his father's stark profile, lips tightening as he read the signs of anger folded into the brown, aged skin. What had he done *this* time?

"How is Yu Hwa?" his father asked.

"We aren't seeing each other any more. We got mutually bored. Middle sister *is* about to give you your third grandson," David said. Èr Jieh had opted for selected gender again—to please father, he was sure. David sighed. "Fuchin, if we have to fight, can we at least fight about the real issue and not about my childless status?"

"Try one of these Phoenix-Eye dumplings. They're made with shrimp. Wild-harvest shrimp, not artificial paste. A gift from Shau Jieh." His father sipped his tea. "You have no child. Can't you think of your family? Who will carry on the name? Who will light incense for me?"

"This is not fifteenth century China." David declined the proffered dumplings with a shake of his head. "Chen BioSource is a family company, not a dynasty."

"Your short-sightedness tires me to death." His father's frown deepened. "I understand that you have been dealing with a representative of the Tanaka corporation. Why didn't you ask me first?"

Aha. "My job is to deal with company representatives so that *you* don't

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have to." David spread his palm so that the silver threads of his net caught the light. "Have I misunderstood?"

"You exceeded your authority. I am the head of Chen BioSource and I am the majority stockholder."

"I only talked to Mr. Takamura this afternoon. Less than five hours ago." They had met in a plush Tokyo office; in virtual, of course. Mr. Takamura had worn the virtual face of a popular Japanese media star; the latest in power dressing. "I was going to bring it up in conference, tomorrow." After he finished *Creation*. After the opening.

"That is not appropriate." His father's palm slapped down on the lacquer table, making the pot shiver. "I am to be consulted before *any* such dealings. We will not do business with Tanaka."

"Fuchin." David hung on to his temper with an effort. "Have you discussed this with the rest of the family? Have you talked to Dà Jieh, to Eldest Sister? Half of the genetic templates we market are for improved strains of commercial sea-life. I gave you the report on the upcoming revision of the Antarctic treaty. Japan is rumored to be the winning bidder for harvest rights in the antarctic waters. Tanaka is the largest Japanese firm involved in serious aquaculture. They will benefit. They made us an outstanding offer."

"I risked everything to create Chen BioSource." His father rose stiffly to his feet. "I did it for our family; for you and your sisters, for your children's futures. I did *not* do it to benefit Tanaka. I am sick to death of hearing about Tanaka. You would throw away everything that I have worked for, give it away to strangers. You have no sense of family."

"And I wonder about your sense of business," David said in English. He clenched his fists on his knees. "I was not selling out the firm. Tanaka is interested in a long-term contract, that's all. I thought our intention was to make a profit."

"There is profit and there is profit."

"And Tanaka is Japanese." David met his father's disapproving stare. "Prejudice is an antique and expensive luxury, Fuchin."

"And loyalty is beyond price. Your eldest sister agrees with me. Tanaka is a danger to our independence."

"Does she?" David's laugh hurt his throat. "That's a new tune, considering that her last three designs were targeted specifically for Tanaka's Pacific fisheries—*with* their direct input." He should have expected this. Dà Jieh was always ready to stick a knife into him, where their father was concerned. "If I'm so incompetent and disloyal, then why don't you fire me and hire someone else?" he demanded bitterly.

"Do you want to waste your life playing your expensive games?" his father's lip curled. "You are my son. You are *Chen*. Chen BioSource is *your* heritage."

"And *your* dynasty." David flushed. He got to his feet, stared down at his father. "I'll meet with Mr. Takamura and reject his offer. I hope the *family* firm doesn't regret this."

"Er-dz!"

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David wanted to ignore his father's command, but his muscles obeyed out of lifelong habit, pausing David at the door, turning him around to face his father.

"I have decided to retire. Two months from today." His father's face might have been a mask, carved from dark, bitter wood. "On that day, Chen BioSource will become your responsibility. On that day, you may do as you wish."

David turned on his heel without bowing, without speaking. He strode through the anteroom, out into the large atrium that his father shared with David's youngest half-sister. She was waiting for him, sitting on an upholstered bench beside a small pool of water-lilies. Her hair was pulled back smoothly from her wide face, braided into an intricate knot at the base of her neck, and she wore a floor-length tunic of jade colored cotton.

"Come sit with me," she said in Mandarin and patted the bench. "Fu-chin is feeling very threatened today."

"By what, Shau Jieh?" David dropped onto the seat beside her.

"It's because he's old. He knows that he is starting to make mistakes and it terrifies him."

"He didn't seem very terrified. I got the impression that *I* made the mistakes." David nudged a polished pebble from the rim of the pool. It fell into the crystal water with a tiny splash. Gold and white koi fled, trailing diaphanous fins.

"Fuchin sees himself in you—perhaps too clearly." She smiled at the widening rings on the pool's surface. "How does that *work*? I can't tell that the water is a holo unless I try to touch it."

"There's a chip inside each pebble." David nudged another bit of agate into the holographic pool. "The program senses it and generates the ripples."

"It's a wonderful job, Little Brother. What are you working on now?"

"A piece called *Creation*." David let go of his anger. Shau Jieh was only four years his senior, and the only sister with whom he had been close as a child. His middle and elder sisters had been adults—disapproving adults—to his young eyes. Only Shau Jieh had been willing to play tag and fly kites with him. "It's about the origins of life on Earth," he told her. "Sort of a symphony of evolution. It shows on the Net, tomorrow."

"Wonderful." She clapped her hands with delight. "I'll Net into it. Did you tell Fuchin?"

"Tell him what?" The bitterness rose in David's throat again. "He doesn't approve of my *games*. And you—you're throwing away your life here, Shau Jieh. You don't have to be his servant. Why don't you move out, or move in with someone who'll appreciate what they've got?"

"I like living here." She blushed. "Fuchin didn't mean it. About your art." She touched David's arm lightly, tracing the silver threads of his net with her fingertips. "Chen BioSource has eaten him," she said sadly. "It's become his immortality, and lately he's been feeling very mortal. You care about your art, and that frightens him."

"You protect him too much." David smiled to take the sting out of his

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words. "Chen BioSource would have fallen apart years ago, if you weren't here to keep us all speaking to each other. Sometimes, though, I wish . . . " he shook his head impatiently, at a loss for words. What *did* he wish? That his father would enter one of his pieces? Approve of it? How childish, David thought. Father wouldn't even step into virtual to deal with an important client. "As long as you're playing mediator, ask Eldest Sister to leave me alone." He tugged at the thick braid of his hair. "I have enough trouble without her encouraging our father's prejudices."

"Don't be angry. Dà Jieh cares about her genetic designs as much as you do about your virtuals. She gets . . . jealous."

"Of *what*? Surely not of *me,* her incompetent little mongrel brother?" He laughed, but his sister looked troubled. She was taller than he when she stood up, but sitting down, her enormous eyes gave her the look of an anxious child. David bent down and kissed the perfectly straight part on top of her head. "I'll try not to get into another fight with her," he promised, dropping back into English. "But I wish she'd lay off. I make plenty of trouble for myself without her help. Why can't we get along?"

"What's bothering you tonight, Younger Brother?"

"Does it show so much?" David looked down at her hand. Those thick, blunt fingers looked so clumsy, could communicate such warmth. "Fu-chin told me that he's going to retire," David said slowly. "In two months. Shau Jieh, I'm confused. He accuses me of betraying the family with one breath, tells me that he's turning the company over to me with the next."

"Fuchin thinks that you do a very good job," his sister said in a low voice.

"Does he? I'd like to hear that from *him.* Just once." David stood abruptly. "I have a *game* to finish."

"Don't be angry."

"I try," David said through tight lips. "I really do, Shau Jieh. Good night."

"Good night," his sister said, but her eyes were sad. Frowning into the depths of the holoed koi pool, she didn't look up as he left.

David took a cab to his tower, caught the lift to his mid-level floor. Beyond the transparent walls of the tube, the spilled jewels of LA's lights sank downward into darkness. For decades, the city had waited for The Quake. The Big One. It had never arrived. David imagined the spangled city-scape shattering, blossoming into flame and ruin. Seen from this height, distanced and abstract, it would be a beautiful and terrible image. Powerful. The lift stopped at his floor and David pulled himself away from the view.

David maintained a single room beside his lab. It was sparely decorated, the opposite of his father's cluttered space. A few cushions lay scattered around a single low table, and a futon on a platform served as bed and sofa. His excess income went into the purchase of Netspace for his virtuals. David ordered himself a cup of tea from the kitchen-wall, feeling slightly disoriented, as if the room had changed subtly in his

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absence. He had never been truly able to imagine himself as the executive of Chen BioSource, even though he had known that it would happen someday. David stared into the golden depths of his tea. His father's retirement had seemed as real and as unreal as the predicted Big Quake; a threat that hovered forever beyond the horizon of tomorrow.

But tomorrow had arrived.

David left his tea on the table, went into his lab. He stripped off his tunic, tossed it into a corner. Light rippled across the silver threads embedded in his skin. You had to be netted *in utero,* during early fetal development. Those threads translated every twitch of muscle, every biochemical shift, to his virtual programs. An intradermal net gave you the ultimate range of interaction in virtual.

Ironic, that it had enabled David to practice virtual art. Father certainly hadn't spent Chen money on it for *that* purpose. It had been an investment for the business, for the family. Food and family, David thought sourly. Our cultural obsessions. "Studio," he commanded, and spread his arms.

The walls shimmered, became the off-white walls of his virtual studio, soaring two stories to a multipaned skylight. An easel stood in one corner. A half finished painting of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* stood on its paint-spattered shelf. A green plant spread lush, tropical leaves in one corner, and a black and white cat washed its face contentedly on an antique steam radiator. Dust motes glittered in a shaft of sunlight that found its way through the skylight, and soft dulcimer music filled the air.

In here, in the virtual sanctuary of his Studio, neither his father nor Chen BioSource existed. David walked over to a rack of canvases that stood against one wall. He picked out *Creation*—green water and black rock painted with heavy, confident brush strokes. It was his strongest work yet. David pulled on the canvas. It stretched in his hands, lengthening, widening, until it was door-sized. It *became* a doorway, opening onto heaving waves and a small lava crag. No sign of fox prints. David started to step through the doorway, paused as a two-toned chime rang through his Studio. Only a few friends knew the entry code. "Come in," David said and sighed.

A door appeared in the studio wall, a smooth panel of hand-rubbed birch. It swung open to reveal a tall, slender man with spiked blond hair and the face of a breathtakingly beautiful boy.

"Hello, Beryl."

"You're working, dear heart?" Beryl wandered over to the canvas-door, moving with languid grace. He peered in and shrugged. "Your stuff's good, but it's too subtle for me. I like a little raw violence stuck in here and there."

"Thanks." David snapped his fingers and a white curtain dropped across the pre-Cambrian scene. Right now, he did not want to listen to Beryl's deft needling, or a dose of the latest gossip. All he wanted to do was to walk through that door into his piece, lose himself in it. "What's up?" he asked shortly.

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"I've got a little present for you." Beryl reached and a padded chair appeared under his hand. "No charge, for a friend." He curled into the chair, smiling.

Beryl's body language reminded David of a cat. A supple, purring leopard. David wondered what Beryl looked like in the flesh—in flesh-time. "You charge for everything," David said. "Even if it doesn't always show up on my Exchange account."

"You wound me." Beryl didn't look wounded. "Who are BioSource's enemies, dear heart?"

"Enemies?" David blinked. "We've got plenty of rivals in the field; Antech and Selva Internacional are probably our biggest competitors. Why?"

"Someone is buying Chen BioSource security codes on the Net."

"*What?*"

"When did you lose your hearing, dear heart?"

Sabotage? Piracy? The possibilities buzzed in David's head like biting flies. He wanted to doubt, but Beryl hadn't acquired his reputation by selling flawed information. "We're not a high-end operation." David shook his head slowly. "We're not big time. Who the hell wants to pirate gene-templates? It would be cheaper to *buy* them."

"I told you what I know." Beryl yawned. "Find out who's buying and ask *them*."

Troubles, troubles. He would have to warn the rest of the family and spend time reviewing security for cracks. It would mean upset, a flare of tempers and accusations. His father was going to throw a fit. David's earlier headache had come back. How long before he spent his every waking moment worrying about Chen BioSource?

"I'm off. Edith is throwing a hot party tonight. Are you coming?" Beryl's chair vanished as he stood. "No? Too bad. Well, If I hear any whispers about Chen codes, I'll let you know."

"For a price."

"Of course. Wasn't my information on the Antarctica treaty worth the investment?"

It would have been, if his father had been willing to listen. David balled his hand into a fist as the birchwood door closed behind Beryl and vanished. No time for *Creation,* now. He windowed into BioSource Security, called up a quick overview of the last ten days. No one had tried to enter. David purchased an extra level of protection, wincing at the cost. He chewed his lip, considering. He should call Father. But his father would want to know David's source, and he did not approve of freelancers like Beryl. So the family would get into it, spend the night in a frenzy of argument, and nothing more would be accomplished, anyway.

If someone already had the codes and tried to use them, the extra layer of security he was installing should alert David. If they'd already been into Chen filespace, it was too late.

Who wanted to spend that kind of money to swipe a handful of genetic

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designs? *Some*one did. He would have to ask Eldest Sister about it. Tomorrow would be soon enough. In fact, it would be too soon.

Near midnight, David finally windowed out of Security. Tired, but too tense to even contemplate sleep, he swept the curtain aside and plunged into the surge of the Pre-Cambrian ocean. Life formed and reformed around him, evolution in full song, a dance of eternity. David watched it from his rock, a cold sinking in the pit of his stomach. It had looked good, this afternoon.

It didn't look good to him now. It looked flat and over-ambitious, like a kid trying to copy the Mona Lisa with crayons. Technical perfection with no soul. A three-D video game. A flash of rusty color caught his eye and David spun.

The fox sat on its haunches on a stretch of muddy beach, its head tilted, eyes quizzical.

"You little sneak." David clenched his fists. All the jagged bits and fragments of this night balled up in his stomach, ignited into rage. "You damn Network ghost! Stay the *hell* out of my pieces!" He leaped off his rock, staggering in waist-deep water. "I'll trace you. I'll *kill* you, do you hear me?" Panting, he struggled for the beach.

The fox flicked its white-tipped tail and fled.

"Bastard!" David yelled after it. He stumbled, fell to his knees in the mud, palms slipping, spilling him flat on his face. Rage popped like a bubble inside him. He'd done too good a job on his beach. If he hadn't made the mud slippery, he wouldn't be on his face in it. That irony wrung a laugh out of him as he picked himself up. The fox had vanished. David erased the virtual mud from his skin and continued to run the piece through. There were no signs of any more fox prints.

The effects he had tried to achieve—the harmonies and dissonances, the subtle contrasts in textures and atmosphere—were still there. But he couldn't recapture the excitement he had felt as he created them. David sat down on a rocky headland, fatigue a dry ache behind his eyeballs. Opening jitters, he told himself, but it was more than just jitters. There was a dusty feeling in the back of his brain, a sense of futility. "Beginning," he commanded the program with a sigh. "Run."

Once more, the sea swelled with diversifying and proliferating life. Once more, the ugly, questing snouts of the air breathers poked at the intertidal mud. David frowned at the sky. "Pause." He retrieved the fox-marked scene from storage, overlaid it. Yes. The shadow *improved* it. What the hell, David thought, and merged the overlay in.

This would be his last piece, his last show. In two months, there would not be enough time for this. It would become a hobby, a pleasant diversion. If he did it at *all*. David ran through *Creation* again and again, not satisfied with it, not able to let go of it. In the early hours of the morning, too numb with fatigue to feel *anything*, he downloaded it into the show's Netspace.

"I haven't any idea what they're after." Thin, tall, radiating suppressed

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energy, his eldest sister crossed her arms on her desktop. "Security is *your* problem, isn't it?"

"It is." David forced a smile. When had Dà Jieh started to seriously dislike him? A cloudy memory stirred in his mind—a formal family dinner with some honored guest or other. David remembered cushions piled beneath him so that he could reach the table, remembered his father's hand on his head as he boasted of David's progress with his tutorials. He remembered his eldest sister's eyes, as she sat silently across the table from him.

At age twenty, she had taken a dual degree in biochemistry and genetics, had done so with the highest honors. Had his father told their visitors *that*? With a child's narcissism, he hadn't remembered. David shook his head. "It would help me if I knew where to start looking," he said. "What have you got under development?"

"If you are making the executive decisions for Chen BioSource, it is advisable to pay attention during conferences."

David swallowed a groan. Shau Jieh had spilled the beans. "You do a great job of keeping us informed." He dropped into English. "But what about projects in the theoretical stage? Things that you haven't officially begun to develop yet? Have you seen any signs of entry into your filespace at all?"

"No. Nothing is complete enough to steal. I hope your Security is as tight as you claim. Have you discussed this with our father?"

"Not yet. We're at an impasse, unless we can discover who is after us." David sighed. They were meeting in his sister's Office virtual. It was a packaged job, standard and plastic. He had offered once to design her something more interesting. He wouldn't make that mistake again. "What about the new line of cod that you're working on?" he asked.

"Tanaka's the only company doing open-sea farming on any scale." She frowned down at her desktop, ran her long fingers through her clipped-short hair. "They've already contracted for it. Why steal it? No. I would guess that your pirate is after the high-yield strain of oil-producing corn cells we've targeted for the vat-culture industry. It will outperform anything on the market."

Her expression was earnest, but David frowned. She was dealing with him in realtime and her Office wasn't editing her body language. There was . . . evasion in her posture. "Dà Jieh, Eldest Sister, I didn't know about Fuchin's plans before last night." He groped for the words he needed. "I'm not . . . happy about his decision. I don't think that I'm ready to take this on yet. I'll do the best I can, but I need your help," he said. "I need the whole family's help."

"Perhaps you should tell our father *ni bù néng*, that you can't do it." She had reverted to Mandarin, her tone coldly formal.

"I promised Shau Jieh that I wouldn't fight with you."

"You'd rather play your precious games."

Father's words. "They're not *games*," David said.

"Oh, yes. *You* call it *art*." His sister smiled coldly. "You remind me so

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much of your mother. Shau Jieh tells me that she's somewhere in the Colorado Preserve. Heli-skiing with her latest lover. She only liked to play games and spend Chen money."

"I'll give you the status report on Security as soon as it's complete," David said. He bowed, turned on his heel and stepped into his Studio. "What does she *want* from me?" he said. "Damn it!"

The cat blinked at him from its perch on the radiator, jumped down and arched against his ankles. David reached down to scratch its ears absently. Yes, his mother was in Colorado. He wondered how Shau Jieh knew—wondered if Youngest Sister was keeping track of her. She had made a complete break with their father when she had left, but unexpectedly, David had received a call from her. It had come a month ago, on his thirty-first birthday, a barely remembered voice from a barely remembered past. She had left his father—and David—when he was two.

Reality and unreality. David gave the cat one last pat and straightened. Special lenses in his eyes let him see a cat. He stretched out a hand and visual suggestion made his nerves interpret low-level electric stimulation from his net as warm flesh and fur. So he petted a cat and it comforted him. You could make love in virtual, to a perfect, unreal partner. You could fight an enemy. Your body could go into shock from a virtual wound. A month ago, he had sat in the virtual of a plush resort livingroom across from a petite woman with fine pale skin, a Chinese face and reddish hair. His mother had looked thirty-five, no older. She had smiled at him with a sad, slightly puzzled expression, as if she couldn't quite remember him, or couldn't believe that he was actually her son. They had drunk coffee together and she had asked about his art. *I couldn't live in your father's world,* she had said, as if she was answering a question. *I tried, but I couldn't. I am sorry, David.*

I didn't ask, David thought. I've never asked her why she left. He watched the cat leap back onto its radiator. The thirty-five-year-old woman on the virtual sofa had been as unreal as this cat. In fleshtime, his mother would be in her late fifties. That young woman on the sofa had been more real to David than the dim memories that sometimes haunted his dreams.

The boundary between the real and the unreal was a fragile one. David rubbed his eyes, remembering that family dinner again, and how he had beamed in the spotlight of his father's pride. Once again, he tried to remember if Fuchin had praised Dà Jieh, but all he could summon was a vision of her cold, angry eyes. "Access Hans Renmeyer," David said, and sighed. "Semi-formal mode."

The square, blunt features of his agent appeared in the air in front of David. "David." Renmeyer smiled, visible only from the waist up. "I was going to call you. *Creation* has accumulated the greatest share of access-points of any piece in the MultiNet show this past twenty-four hours."

"That's great," David murmured. This wasn't a realtime conversation. Renmeyer's body language was just a hair off. You could always tell a sim from a realtime interaction.

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"The Show committee has offered you a further three days of exhibition," Renmeyer's sim announced. "They'll download your royalty statement to your personal account at the conclusion of the show. It's the standard contract. I have it ready for your signature, if you agree."

So *Creation* was a success. Absently, David scanned the oversized document that appeared in front of him, laid his palm against the signature box. Such a success might conceivably bring a gallery invitation. David wandered into his living room, ordered up a bowl of noodles and bok choi that he didn't really want. He should feel triumphant. Fulfilled. *Pleased,* at least.

He felt tired.

David spent the morning windowed into security, reviewing reports, double checking for unusual currents in the daily informational flow. Nothing presented itself to him. If anyone was probing Chen security, they were too good for him to detect. Thoughtfully, he called up the file on the company's current projects—Dà Jieh's projects. She was the creative genius that powered Chen. She was the one who found the backdoor means to ends that other engineers had given up on.

She knows what our pirate is after, David thought, and then wondered why he thought so. You could attach a dozen negative interpretations to her hostility. Some day, he would ask their youngest sister about it. Shau Jieh would know. Shau Jieh had worshipped her as a kid, had followed her tall, brilliant sister like a shadow.

David finally exited security in mid-afternoon, spent a hurried couple of hours reviewing the day's reports. Chen BioSource was down on the Exchange and there was no reason for it to be down. He scowled. Rumors of the pirate interest? He would have to ask Beryl. The Studio waited for him on the other side of the wall. David could feel its breathing presence as he dumped his uneaten noodles into the recycler and drank a glass of water. *Creation* was a success, with an extended showing to its credit. Enough to interest a gallery? Enough to get it a stationary showing?

It didn't matter any more.

The walls squeezed in on him. David banged his glass down on the counter. It tipped over, rolled off onto the carpeted floor. It didn't break and he didn't pick it up. Grabbing a jacket from the closet, he went out into the hall, down the lift and out into the street.

The city streets always depressed David. Crowded, littered with a human spoor of food wrappers and trash, they made him think of cracks in the city reality, acumulating dirt and debris. Black-market vendors hawked food, chemicals, and information from carts and coat-pockets. Public terminals and virtual booths clustered at every corner.

People in the street shuffled past in a faceless river, on their way from *here* to *there,* flesh brushing flesh, making no eye contact. We are at our most isolated in the street, David thought—although lately, he had felt as if someone was following him every time he left the tower. He never

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noticed any particular person when he turned to look, but the feeling haunted him. He didn't feel that shadow's presence today, though. Shoulders hunched, David threaded his way through the crowd, welcoming its grimy, claustrophobic crush. He couldn't think down here, and he didn't *want* to think.

A crowd filled the small square at the end of the block, thronged around some shouting evangelist, or revolutionary, or entertaining crazy. Pedestrian traffic stalled, backed up, and spilled over into the street. David let the crowd pressure push him into a narrow alley between two old office buildings. A small shop opened into it; a custom clothing designer. The expensive holo decoration and squalid site suggested that it was the peak of chic . . . for the moment. The holos were mediocre. David eyed them, then noticed three figures crowded into the shadowy recess of a sealed-up doorway.

Two youths held a kid between them. They wore black skinthins and tattoos on their hairless scalps. The boy looked about twelve; street-kid ragged. This was just another city reality, ugly and everpresent. People walked, hurried, or strolled past. There were fewer here than in the main thoroughfare, but they were equally blind; as if they were walking inside separate virtuals. Light from the storefront holo shone on the kid's face, warm as afternoon sunlight. It made his green eyes glitter. David hesitated. Skinthins peeked from beneath the kid's dirty clothes. The way he tilted his head and hunched his shoulders against the hands that gripped him looked . . . familiar. David mentally overlaid red fur on that thin face, adding pricked ears. The boy's lips drew back from his teeth, and David saw a fox face, a ghost face that had laughed at him with glittering green eyes.

"Hey," he said, and stopped.

The taller of the youths turned to stare at David. His pale eyes looked like glass marbles in his expressionless face. His posture suggested that David was no threat. With unhurried grace, he turned back to the kid, seized his wrist with a long-fingered hand, and twisted it.

The kid screamed.

Still unhurried, the two of them let go of the boy, stalked past David, and disappeared into the main street. David stared after them, stunned by their casual violence. Quick movement at the edge of his vision jolted him out of his trance. He turned in time to grab hold of the kid's grubby tunic. "Not so fast." The virtual skinthins beneath the filthy clothes were expensive, state-of-the-art. David shoved the boy back against the concrete wall, eyes narrowing as the kid's chin came up. Yeah, it was *him*. The fox-ghost. His body language gave him away. "What the hell have you been doing in my pieces?" he demanded

"Nothing, man. Leggo! You're crazy."

"Don't give me *nothing*." David shook him. "You damn vandal! You've been all *over* the place! Did you think it was fun? Did you get a kick out of screwing around in my pieces and messing things up? Was that it? *Was it?*"

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"No," the kid gasped. "I went in because you're *good*. You're the best."

"Bullshit," David said between his teeth.

"No shit, man. I'm an artist. Like you." The kid looked up through the tangle of his dirty-blond hair, his fox-eyes glittering. "I'm good. But you're better. For now."

"So work your own pieces."

"Netspace costs. And I wanted to see how *you* did stuff."

Something unsettlingly like veneration gleamed in those green eyes. David scowled. The kid was thin. His bones pushed sharp edges against his pale skin. He was cradling the hand that the youth had twisted, and there were pain shadows at the corners of his mouth.

"That guy hurt you," David said.

"I went into this jerk's abstract. What a piece of shit." The kid's lip curled. "But he's got better security than you do. I guess word got around that I was haunting your stuff, so they looked for me here."

"You've been following me, haven't you? In the street."

"I wanted to see you. It's just a thing, you know? Realtime flesh, I mean—I just like to do that. *You're* the same," he said. "You don't put on a Self when you're working."

"Why bother?" David looked away from those glittering eyes. He felt a twinge of recognition for the *hunger* that he saw there. That shadow *had* added just the right touch to *Creation*. David sighed. "Someone needs to look at your hand," he said. "Come on."

The kid didn't say a word on the way to a nearby clinic. David half expected him to bolt, would have been relieved if he had. The boy's body language suggested flight. He walked tense and wary, poised. But he didn't bolt. At the clinic, at David's request, a receptionist ushered the boy into a treatment cubicle. He hunched silently on the bench, a cornered fox, ignoring David. He didn't make a sound as a bored medical tech set his broken wrist with a single twisting pull, but his skin went dead white and beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. The tech put a cast on his wrist, handed him two orange capsules for pain, and left.

David ran his own card through the terminal for payment. Outside, the kid followed him blindly, as if he was sleepwalking. The plastic cast encased his hand and part of his forearm. The boy cradled the hand in his good arm, carrying it as if it was a piece of wood. At the entrance to David's tower, he hesitated, and a shadow of his earlier wariness stirred in the green depths of his eyes.

"It's all right," David said, because the look in the kid's eyes demanded *some* kind of reassurance.

The wariness didn't go away, but the kid nodded and walked through the door into the entryway, as if David had extended a formal invitation.

David felt a growing uneasiness as the lift carried them upward. Slanting beams of afternoon sun touched the soaring new towers and the old office buildings, gilded the city with light the color of hope. He hadn't meant to do this—bring the boy home. His father's impending retirement cut him off from this kid with his hungry eyes. David had simply meant

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to pay for the medical treatment, repay that moment of veneration. Well, whatever he had meant or not meant, the kid was *here*: wide, drugged eyes focused on the expanding cityscape, filling the cramped lift with the thick, sour smell of unwashed flesh. David wrinkled his nose.

Feed him and send him home.

In his apartment, David ordered the kid a sandwich from the kitchen-wall, and sat across from him at the small table, mildly repelled by the ravenous manner in which the kid devoured the food. "What's your name?" David asked as the kid licked the last crumbs from his fingers. "Where do you live?"

"I'm Flander." Uninvited, he helped himself to coffee from the kitchen-wall, perched himself on the corner of the table. The glaze of shock was fading from his eyes and he swung one foot, restless and a little tense. "I live around," he said.

"On your own?"

"Shy-Shy kind of keeps track."

"Who's Shy-Shy?" David asked. He didn't really want to know, wanted this kid out of his apartment, all accounts settled and closed.

"She's a cool lady I know. I hang around with her a lot." Flander picked at the slick plastic of his cast, frowning. "*Creation* did real good on the Net today. What are you going to work on next?" And then: "You left it in. The shadow."

"It was a good touch. Valid." David prowled across the room, aware suddenly of how *small* it was. "I . . . don't know what I'm going to work on next." I'm hedging, David thought. He wasn't ready to put it into words yet—that he was through—not to himself, and certainly not to this fox-child.

"What about that volcano piece? I liked it and I haven't seen it for awhile. I can't get at your stuff when it's in storage."

"Don't sound so apologetic," David growled. No, that hunger in the kid's eyes wasn't for *food*. "I'll show it to you." He pushed his chair back. Let this be the closing act, he decided. Let the kid muck around in the piece; David had been blocked on it for months, and it didn't matter anymore now anyway. Then he could send him home to his friend with the weird name, Shy-Shy. David went into his lab. The kid followed, pulling a virtual mask down over his head, tugging a glove over his uninjured hand. "Studio," David said and watched the walls stretch and pale. "Not the fox again?" He glowered at the prick-eared creature. "That was quick. You know all my codes, don't you?"

"Not all of them. I told you—I can't get into your storage." The fox lolled its tongue, grinned. "I like this Self. There are people who want to know what I look like in fleshtime."

"Sure of yourself, aren't you?" David reached for the racked canvases. "What would those two have done if I hadn't interrupted them?"

The fox didn't answer that one. David stretched out the volcano canvas, stepped into it. The fox was there ahead of him, nose in the air, as if it was sniffing the breeze. It was limping, David noticed, holding its left

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paw clear of the ground. The feel of the piece washed over him, and he frowned. He had started with rage, poured it out in billowing ash and thick remorseless streams of glowing lava. Then he had tried to reshape it with a gentle moonlit sky and the lush leaves of surviving tropicals. All he had achieved was the flat realism of a travelogue, and the nagging feeling that it *could,* damn it, work.

Scowling, David muted the hot glare of the lava column, added steam where it touched a small stream, turned the steam opalescent in the moonlight.

"You're lucky you're netted," the fox said in Flander's voice. "It's tough to do the really fine stuff in skinthins. Who paid to fix you up?"

"Our company."

"Shy-Shy's netted." Flander/fox darted past him, loping three-legged into the blackened desolation beyond the creeping tongue of lava. "What about this?" He nosed the gray ash, and tiny leaves unfolded.

Yeah, you could do it that way . . . maybe get the right effect. David chewed his lower lip, wandered back along the cooling lava flow. Try this. . . . He planted sprouts and cracking seeds. Small animals scuttled through the ashy wasteland, burrowing, mating, living. Beyond rage, hope . . . Yeah, it was a nice contrast, if he could get it into balance, give it some *focus.* He shaped, vanished what he had just done, swore, and tried something new. Life in the aftermath of devastation? Hope sprouting in the ash-heap of despair? It could work, yes, it *was* working. Excitement seized him, flowed like molten gold through his veins. David reached, made and unmade, twisted and shaped the fiery world in a frenzy of creation.

Hours later, fatigue finally stopped him. David put down the virtual boulder he was holding, mildly surprised by the tremor in his muscles. He wondered what time it was. He felt good, fine. He hadn't felt like this since *Creation* had started to come together. His knees quivered and the muscles between his shoulderblades ached, but it was a good tiredness, a welcome one. "Store," David rasped, dry-mouthed. He looked around for the fox. He had lost track of it some time ago. "Exit Studio," he said, and staggered as the lab reappeared around him.

The kid—Flander—was curled up in the corner, head pillowed on his arm, the plastic cast a white blot in the muted light. He was asleep. "Hey," David said.

He didn't twitch.

The floor kept trying to tilt beneath his feet. David shrugged and stumbled to the other room to drink glass after glass of water. Outside, in the grimy reality of the streets, it would be getting light. Before he fell across his futon, David carried an extra quilt into the lab and draped it over Flander.

It seemed as if only minutes had passed before the House woke him. It nagged him out of bed with subsonics and unbearable jokes about family, business, and the demands of a schedule. David felt like shit. He

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was not in the mood for jokes this morning, wondered what the *hell* had possessed him to design such an adolescent wake-up. Tea seemed like a good idea, but it pooled like molten lead in his stomach.

He had let himself forget about the kid.

David stopped dead in the doorway to the lab. Flander was still asleep, tangled in the quilt, his injured arm sticking out as if it didn't quite belong to him. David groped for a solution to this situation, found nothing ready to hand. With a sigh, he sat down in a realtime chair, called up his office, and put the kid out of his mind.

There was plenty waiting for him on the slab of polished jade that was his desk. A major supplier, Chem Suisse, had unexpectedly failed them. During the night, Chen BioSource had fallen even farther on the Exchange. David wiped the depressing reports from the jade with a sweep of his hand, frowned as glowing red letters reappeared in their place. It was a message from his father announcing that he was on his way over to see David. In person, of course.

Your father has arrived, House announced.

David groaned and went to let his father in.

"*Ni häushiang bìng.* You look sick," his father said as David opened the door. "What did you do? Drink all night?" He marched into the room.

Eldest Sister was with him. She gave David a smooth smile, walked primly across the room to seat herself at the table.

Their father clucked his tongue disapprovingly at the dirty dishes piled beside the kitchen-wall. "Can't you at least offer me tea?"

"May I offer you tea, Fuchin?" Resigned, David ordered pot and cups from the kitchen-wall, carried them to the table. "This is my *room.* It isn't an office."

"Your hospitality is as lacking as your attention to family affairs."

"Fuchin, I have spent a large part of the past thirty-six hours dealing with family business." David noticed his sister's expectant expression, flushed, and got hold of his temper.

"Your new Security costs us a fortune."

"Surely you reviewed my report on the piracy threat. Would you rather have someone in our filespace?"

"The expectation of theft is yours, not mine." His father glared at David. "Our margin of profit will be severely strained by the extra Security cost. I am here because we are about to default on our contract with North America Aquaculture. Dà Jieh tells me so."

"The report is on your desk. You haven't gotten to it yet?" His sister's tone was demure. "The contract depends on a specific delivery date. As you surely know. Since Chem Suisse can't fill our order for amino acids, we won't meet the deadline."

"What are you going to *do* about it?" His father's hand slapped the tabletop and David jumped.

"I plan to contact other suppliers." David turned his tea cup between his fingers, struggling to organize his sluggish thoughts. "We can probably get what we need from European Pharmaceuticals."

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"We don't have much of a margin," Dà Jieh interposed smoothly. "If we get too far behind, we won't make the deadline, and North America can legally decline the order."

"They won't do that." David banged his cup down. "They've given us leeway on deadlines before."

"You should have thought about this," his father interrupted harshly.

The supply failure had been a matter of bad luck and bad timing, but Fuchin was never willing to blame luck. He *was* willing to blame David. Anger sat like a stone in David's chest, but beneath the anger was a cold awareness that his father was partly right. If he had considered *all* possibilities, he could have lined up alternate suppliers ahead of time.

I didn't consider the possibility of The Quake happening tomorrow, either, David thought bitterly. He lifted his head suddenly, caught his sister's eyes on him. Hatred? David felt a small jolt of shock, but her face smoothed so quickly that David wondered if he had imagined it.

"If I receive the required supplies within a week, I can push our production schedule," she said. "Perhaps we will make the deadline."

"I hope that you will not be so lax again." Father stood. "I expect you to be competent. At least that." He looked over David's shoulder, frowned at the doorway that led to David's lab. "You cannot play your games and do a good job for your family."

"I have never let my *art* hurt Chen BioSource," David said as he ushered his father out of the room.

The words sounded weak to David, a petty defiance without real dignity. He clenched his teeth and bowed to his father. When the door had closed safely behind them, he stomped into his lab. He had intended to call up his office, start querying suppliers, but a virtual was already open. David staggered as his net automatically popped him into a familiar landscape of lava and struggling greenery.

The fox lay on a patch of black loam, licking its injured paw. "Wow, man." It snapped its jaws. "You really did a fine job on this last night."

"Thanks." David struggled with leftover temper. "Go play with it. It's all yours, okay?" He called up a door, opened it into his office.

"What do you mean? I thought we were working on it?" The fox limped after him, ears pricked. "That old boy sounded like he was bugging you. How come you didn't tell him and the bitch to take a hike?"

"Eavesdropping is rude. The old boy happens to be my father *and* my boss. The bitch is my sister. Go play."

"I wasn't eavesdropping. I don't speak the lingo, and don't give me *play*, man. You still should've told him to take a hike." The fox leaped three-legged onto the corner of the jade desk. It stretched out a paw, hissed a quick patter of commands. A tiny, perfect image of David's father appeared on the desktop, hiked stiffly across the smooth surface. Its face looked thunderous.

It was a marvelous caricature. In spite of himself, David smiled. "You *are* good." His smile faded. "It's a long story, Flander. I . . . don't have

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time for this anymore. The volcano's a throwaway." He looked away. "If you want to do something with it, go do it."

"You're crazy, man." Flander's voice skidded up half an octave. "You're *good*. You can't just *stop*. Some gallery'll offer for you, for sure. That piece is no throwaway. Man, what you *did* to it, last night. And I was *asleep*." The fox flattened its ears.

Flander was right. The volcano piece *wasn't* a throwaway. Not any more. David closed his eyes, remembering last night's magic. "I've got work that has to be done," he said. "Give the fox a rest, will you?"

"So do your work. I'll hang around till you're done." Fox metamorphosed into a fur-covered boy-shape, shed fur all over the desktop to become Flander. He looked up at David through a fringe of dirty hair. "I don't want to screw around by myself," he said softly. "I want to see how you made that piece *work* like you did."

How do you say no to veneration? David looked away from the kid's glittering, fox-ghost eyes. He didn't *want* to say no. "What about this Shy-Shy?" He fired his last shot. "Isn't she going to worry?"

"I called her from your Studio." Flander grinned. "She said you sound like a good guy, that I was lucky as hell that I met you, and I should say thank you about a hundred times. Thank you," he said.

David sighed. "I've got to deal with this business stuff first. Go take a shower. You stink."

David spent the morning in his office, using Security to scour Chen BioSource filespace. He came up clean, but the cost made him cringe. Better he should have found evidence of a break-in. Father was going to scream, and that wouldn't help their shaky position on the Exchange. He tracked Beryl down in one of his virtual lairs, quizzed him about that mysterious shakiness.

Rumors, Beryl told him. He was a willowy youth with a shaved scalp today, but his leopard-slink gave him away. *It's floating around that someone is out to shaft Chen BioSource. Sorry, dear heart. No names, just intent.*

"Don't send me a bill for *that*." David told him sourly.

He tracked down an alternate source for Eldest Sister's amino acids, and turned the details over to his middle sister. Er Jieh handled that kind of thing. If they didn't run into trouble in development, Chen BioSource would make the contract deadline. Barely, but they would make it. David stretched, grimacing at the gritty ache of tension in his neck. He needed a shower, he decided, and exited his office.

Instead of exiting to his lab, he found himself standing in his volcano piece. Flander—in human form, this time—was sitting crosslegged in a patch of scorched and wilting fern, chin in his hands, staring moodily at a blackened tongue of cooling lava. "I can see what you changed," he said. "I can't figure how it makes the piece work."

"I don't know, either. It just *felt* right to me." David lowered himself to the ground. "That's new," he said nodding at the ferns beneath Flander.

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"I didn't feel like sitting on rock. That's all."

"Sure." David examined the clump. Every crushed or bent leaf was perfect, right down to the smeared film of ash on the green fonds. Flander was showing off. "You have an incredible talent for detail," David said. "But those ferns don't belong there."

"I know. I'll wipe 'em when I get up." The boy tilted his head, eyes bright. "Are you done with the office stuff? Can we do this for awhile?"

"Yes," David said, because he needed to forget the Exchange, his sister's hostility, and his father's eternal dissatisfaction. Hell, why *not* play with this kid?

They worked together. At first, David cloaked himself in the memory of the boy's venerating eyes and tried to assume the role of Teacher. That didn't last long. The kid was good in his own right, quick and perceptive, with an off-beat point of view that somehow resonated with what David tried, sent him off into paroxysms of inspiration. Before long, they were arguing over details, changing and erasing, reshaping the entire piece.

There were fox-prints everywhere.

"Hey, we've got to quit," David said finally.

"Why?" Flander tossed a handful of pebbles into the air, turned them into a flock of small, jewel-toned birds. "I'm not tired."

"You ought to see your face. Have you eaten anything today?" Reluctantly, David shrank the piece to a virtual canvas again, racked it. "I know you haven't."

"Neither have you." Flander scratched beneath the edge of his cast. "It's not that late."

"I can't do another all-nighter. I have a business to run." David exited the Studio, propelled the boy into the main room. He ordered sandwiches and fruit while Flander stripped off his hood and glove. "Eat this," he said, handing a plate to the boy. Shadows stained the skin beneath Flander's eyes, made them seem too large and too bright. "Then go home and get some sleep."

"How come your dad wants you to quit doing art?" Flander bit into a pear, wiped juice from his chin.

"I didn't say he did. It's my decision. I can't just *play* at this," David said slowly. "It matters too much to me. I'm not going to have the time to do it the way I want to do it."

"So you're just going to quit? To do what?"

"To run a family dynasty." David took a huge bite of sandwich. It tasted like sawdust.

"Huh." Flander peeked into his own sandwich, put it down. "I don't know. I probably would've gotten into something dumb if it hadn't been for Shy-Shy—doing sex virtuals for the X-parlors, or shoot-em-ups, or something like that. She kept bugging me all the time, telling me that I had to remember what I *wanted* to do."

There was understanding in his tone, sympathy. This skinny, half-starved street kid was forgiving David for making a bad choice. David choked on his mouthful of food, caught between insult and laughter.

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"You're lucky to have her around," he said when he could finally talk. "She gives you a lot of support."

"She does that," Flander said soberly. "She's the cracker and she's *hot*. She's the one who got me into this artist's Netspace the first time. She's always there for me—I can't remember anybody before Shy-Shy. I wouldn't have made it without her."

The expression in Flander's eyes silenced David. He picked up his plate, hiding an unexpected pang of envy. What would it feel like, to have someone look at you like that? David wrapped Flander's untouched sandwich in a piece of plastic, handed it to the boy. "Eat it later," he said. "If you want to come back, we'll finish this piece." Let this one be the last, instead of *Creation*. He had a little time yet. "Call me from the tower entryway and I'll let you in."

"I'll do that." Flander grinned. "Thanks." He darted out of the apartment, quick as a fox streaking for cover.

David had planned to let Flander do most of the work on the volcano piece, but he couldn't stay out of it. The piece was coming alive, promising to be more powerful than *Creation*. David worked on it whenever he could snatch the time, putting off sleep until he was stumbling with exhaustion. Using Flander's flashes of crazy inspiration as a springboard, he catapulted into soaring flights of invention. The Milky Way fell down into the seething cauldron of the volcano in a cascade of cold light, as if the universe was folding in on itself, coiling back into primordial fire.

Even Beryl should like this one, David thought, and laughed out loud. He had reached a new level in his work, and it felt good. Flander was part of it, too. A big part. David had stopped sending Flander home in the evenings. He let him sleep on the cushions in the main room. It had finally dawned on David that the kid lived on the street. This Shy-Shy might provide emotional sustenance, but Flander's bodily needs were his own business. David nagged him to eat and a little flesh began to hide Flander's bones.

"How come you don't live with her?" David asked Flander one afternoon. The cloud he was working on looked like a pile of oatmeal. "Doesn't she worry about you sleeping on the street?" David scowled at the cloud, erased it with an angry swipe.

"She lives around, okay? She doesn't hang out in any one place very long. You know, you're too stuck on reality." Flander retrieved the cloud, combed it into a glittering comet tail. "Shy-Shy and I take care of each other, and we do just fine."

"Easy. I wasn't criticizing." It sounded as if this Shy-Shy was one of Beryl's cohort, dealing in blackmarket information. You kept your realtime, fleshtime self out of sight, in that trade. David muted the fiery comet-tail to a whisper of ice crystals.

The communication chime interrupted his thoughts. "Come in," David said, glad of an excuse to stop struggling with comet-clouds.

Hans Renmeyer's torso took shape in David's virtual doorway. "David."

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He bowed from invisible hips, in realtime, this visit. "I apologize for the lateness of the hour. I'm interrupting your work."

"That's all right." David exited into his Studio, noticed from the corner of his eye that Flander had reverted to fox shape. "What can I do for you?"

"I hope you're going to have something new for me soon. In the meantime, I have some good news for you." Renmeyer cleared his throat, pausing portentously. "I've received a query from the Roberts Gallery, in London. They are interested in giving your piece *Creation* a stationary show."

A stationary?

"It's not a large gallery." Renmeyer spread his hands apologetically. "But it's relatively prestigious. In my opinion, as your agent, the invitation is well worth your consideration."

Out of the thousands of artists who showed on the Net, only a handful showed stationary. A very small handful.

"I . . . accept," David said.

"Good, good." Renmeyer's smile grew wider, warmer. "I'll review their contract and have something for your signature tomorrow. I wish you continued success," he said, bowed again, and exited.

Fox feet hit David in the small of the back. He turned around and nearly went down flat as Flander, boy-shaped again, threw himself into David's arms with realtime mass and force.

"I told you, man," he yelled gleefully. "I *told* you they'd come after you. You're so good. You're so damned *good*." He sobered suddenly, looked up into David's face. "You're not quitting now. Right?"

"No. I'm . . . not." David drew a long breath. "We're good. *We'll* be great."

"Your old . . . your Dad's going to be pissed, isn't he?"

"I'm not sure that he will ever speak to me again." David exited the Studio, shivered as the lab appeared. A part of him had been shaping this decision as he and Flander had shaped the volcano piece. "Chen BioSource is his universe," David said heavily. "My father designed a son to fit into that universe. The David Chen that he sees is a virtual—the son he believes in, the one that doesn't really exist. I'm not sure he will ever see *me,* or understand who I am."

"That's tough, man." Flander put a hand on David's shoulder in a surprisingly mature gesture of comfort.

"Yeah, it is." David's voice wanted to crack. He put his arm around Flander, squeezing warm, realtime flesh. "I meant it about the *we,*" he said. "We do good together."

"We do that." Flander grinned, fox-eyes dancing. "Wait till *this* piece hits a gallery. What are we going to call it, anyway?"

"I don't know. I haven't come up with a title yet." David tossed his loosened braid back over his shoulder and sighed. "Let's go get some dinner," he said.

* * *

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The House program interrupted them as they celebrated with buns stuffed with real chicken. *Excuse me,* it intoned apologetically. *You have an urgent call from your youngest sister. She says it's an emergency.*

An emergency.

Father. David knew it, even as he stretched a virtual hand to open a door to her apartment.

She wasn't there. A pale, stylized carp with flowing fins—his sister's personal sigil—answered him. "I'm at the hospital," it said in her voice. "Come right away, David. Selva Internacional filed a piracy suit against us, and Fuchin had a heart attack. Please come."

David blinked as his apartment re-formed around him. His arms and legs felt numb, without sensation, as if he had been sitting at the table for hours without moving. The room seemed to be shrinking, closing around him like a fist. David pushed himself stiffly to his feet, breathing too fast as the shrinking room squeezed his ribs, compressed his lungs.

"What's wrong?" Flander pushed his chair back as David started for the door. "What was she saying?"

"Nothing," David said, and walked blindly out of the apartment.

David stood close to Shau Jieh at his father's bedside. He had spent a sleepless night at the hospital, sitting in a barren little waiting room that reeked of disinfectant while a million slow eternities crawled past. He had waited there, trapped in that barren cube, because it would have been wrong to wait at home, to visit the hospital in virtual. Wrong. Fuchin wouldn't even wear skinthins.

Tubes went into his father's nose, into the veins that writhed like blue worms beneath his crepey skin. Orange blobs of remote monitors clung to his head, chest, arms, and legs. Every synaptical flicker was being recorded and evaluated and responded to. Medicine inflicted the ultimate lack of privacy, David thought dully. His father looked shrunken, shriveled, as if the tubes were draining his blood, as if the monitors were alien leeches, sucking away life and substance. David put his arm around his sister's waist, felt her tremble slightly. At the foot of the bed, their middle sister sniffled audibly and predictably into a tissue.

Dà Jieh stood behind her. She raised her head, looked coldly at David. "If you had spent more time attending to business, this would never have happened."

"That is *enough.*" Shau Jieh's tone made them all blink. "We will *not* fight at our father's bedside."

Dà Jieh shrugged and pressed her lips together. Silence filled the small room.

That silence felt like an accusation. David bowed his head, eyes on the pitiless white of the hospital sheet. If he had been in his office yesterday evening, he might have seen the brief before his father had discovered it, might have been able to deal with it, or at least prepare him. Might have, might have . . . David clenched his hands into fists.

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Whoever had bought Chen codes had gotten in and out without tripping Security. They had duplicated his sister's developmental records on her new strain of cod, and they had destroyed some of her files. Now Selva Internacional was claiming that they had developed the template first, that the identical nature of the Chen template indicated piracy. Chen BioSource no longer had the developmental records to disprove Selva's claim.

It had been a very clever bit of espionage. If Selva won their suit in entirety, Chen BioSource would have to file for reorganization. It was not likely that the company would survive it. I should have caught it, David thought bitterly. I shouldn't have taken my sister's word for the untouched state of her records.

When the suit had been filed, he had been in his Studio with Flander. Playing *games*. David turned away from the bed.

"Er-dz? My . . . son?"

The dry whisper sounded faint as the rustle of an insect's wings. "Fuchin?" David bent over the bed, squatted beside it when his father's eyes didn't seem able to focus on his face. "I'm here," he said. "We're all here."

"Save us," he whispered. His withered fingers twitched, touched David's hand. "Chen BioSource will die. The family will die. Don't let it die!"

"Fuchin, it's all right." David took his father's hand and squeezed it gently, frightened by the weakness of that spidery touch. "It's just numbers, Fuchin. How many years have you been playing with numbers?" He forced a smile, tucked his father's hand back onto the bed. "I'll play better than Selva, and everything will be fine."

"It *must* be." His father's withered lips trembled. "It *must* be all right. Please promise me. . . ?"

Death lurked in his father's eyes. David could see its shadow. His immortality, Shau Jieh had said of Chen BioSource. No, David thought. It is his *life*. If it dies, he will die. "I promise," David whispered.

Er Jieh crowded in beside him, weeping openly now, and David used the moment to slip out of the room. There were public terminals at the end of the hallway. Renmeyer's face looked grainy and lifeless on the flat screen.

"I don't understand." The poor resolution couldn't hide his shocked expression. "David, *why* do you want to cancel the gallery show?"

"I don't have time to do the sensory effects." David said woodenly.

"It can't require *that* much time. I don't understand. The contract I presented to you was more than reasonable."

"It's not you. It's not the contract. Look, I'm sorry." David exited the connection abruptly.

It was more than a lack of time that had made him cancel the show. *Sorry*. Who had he been apologizing to? Renmeyer? Flander?

Himself?

Shau Jieh caught up with him at the lift. "Younger Brother, wait." She grabbed his arm, forced him to stop.

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"You stay with him. I can't." David ran his hand across his face as her eyes filled with hurt. "He *created* me, do you realize that? I'm not sure that I'm even real."

"Stop it. He loves you. He does." Her voice was full of pain. "We Chinese are so obsessed with sons. Fuchin is obsessed with it—I know that, and I know that it's not a good thing. But don't hurt him." She clung to his arm. "Don't walk way from him, Little Brother. Not now."

"It's ironic." David raised his arm slowly, turned it so that the silver netting caught the light. "It's ironic that he bought this for me."

"*He* didn't net you." His sister looked surprised. "Your *mother* did. I remember them arguing about it. She used to design virtuals. Before she married Fuchin. I thought you knew."

"I didn't know." David felt numb. I never asked, he thought. She didn't exist for me. Was that what she had been trying to tell him in her awkward, birthday visit? "Don't worry," he said bitterly. "I'm part of our father's private virtual. I can't walk away." David turned his back on her tears and fled.

His apartment seemed unfamiliar to David, as if he had been absent for months, instead of merely hours. David glanced into the lab. Flander was obviously inside some virtual or other. Stripped to his skinthins, hooded and gloved, he sat crosslegged on the floor, eyes fixed on the far wall, unaware of David's fleshtime presence. His good hand twitched as he did whatever he was doing in his invisible universe. David watched him for a moment. Everyone had their own personal virtual, he thought bitterly. Their personal reality.

What is *mine*? he wondered.

David's hand clenched into a fist. He went back into the main room and entered his office. The jade desktop waited for him, covered with neat lines of flowing script. It was the digest of Selva's suit, as reported by his office attorney. The projected outcome looked bad for Chen BioSource, whether they settled or not. Selva had them. It was simply a question of how badly Selva wanted to hurt them and how much they were willing to spend to do it. Corporate espionage and piracy were being prosecuted fiercely in the international courts. David stared at the words until they blurred into meaningless loops and squiggles. Their message didn't change.

I was good, David thought. I have that. I was *good*.

A door appeared in the wall of David's office. "David?" Flander's voice. Virtual knuckles rapped on virtual wood.

Go away, David thought, but he sighed and opened the door. Flander wasn't alone. A tall woman stood beside him. She had silvery hair pulled into a stylish club at the base of her neck and a square, strong face. She was netted.

Shy-Shy. It had to be. I've seen her before, David thought, but the connection slipped away from him.

"Hello." Her voice was low and warm. "I'm sorry to bust in on you like

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this, but Flander doesn't know the meaning of the word patience." She rumpled Flander's hair gently.

Flander grinned back and the absolute *unity* of that shared moment made David look quickly away.

"I asked her to come in," Flander spoke up. "Shy-Shy's *hot,* man. She gets me in *anywhere* I want to go! She can find out who dumped that suit on you. She can find out who is working the levers, no problem."

David felt as if his mouth was hanging open. "What did you do?" he managed finally. "Translate my sister's private message?"

"Sure. You were *way* upset, man. I don't speak the lingo, but the library does." He lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug.

David grimaced, fighting an outraged sense of *invasion.* This was the fox, he reminded himself. The ghost who had slipped in and out of his pieces. Flander was a street kid. Nothing was sacred to him. David sighed, tired beyond belief. "You've been into everything, haven't you? Even my office?"

"Don't blame him too much." Shy-Shy's hand tightened on Flander's shoulder, but the shake she gave him was a gentle one. "You've been good to him and he was really worried. He wouldn't take no for an answer." She laughed softly and pushed a wisp of hair back from her forehead. "I *am* good," she said. "I can find out what you need to know. *If* you want me to. *He* gets to decide," she said to Flander as he opened his mouth. "It's his business, even if you've been into it up to your eyebrows."

"I'm sorry, David." Flander's eyes were anxious. "You didn't tell me not to look."

"It's okay," David said. Shy-Shy was waiting, one casually possessive hand still on Flander's shoulder. She was *dressed*; real-leather boots, natural fiber tunic, fiber-light embroidery. The works. Street-power chic. She wasn't dirty, she wasn't skinny. Why the hell doesn't she take *care* of him? David thought resentfully. "I'd . . . appreciate your help." He forced the words out. "For my father's sake."

David remained in his office while Shy-Shy and Flander worked the Net. They worked together, and he didn't want to watch. Instead, he caught up on the orders, the supply problems, and the reports; all the dreary details of running a business that went on—that *had* to go on—in spite of personal tragedy. He dealt with what had to be dealt with, and kept on working, sorting through the low-priority bits and pieces that had accumulated like dust in the corners of the business. He was obsessing, knew it, and didn't care. In the private hospital room, monitor-leeches tethered his father to life. David could feel the numbers, the projections, and the worries closing around him like fingers, solidifying like the walls of a newly-opened virtual.

When Flander blinked into existence in front of his desk, David started convulsively. "Use the door," he snapped.

"Sorry. I forgot." Flander grinned at him. "Man, I was *right.* I *guessed.*

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Shy-Shy said it would've taken her twice as long if I hadn't tipped her where to start."

So the power-dressed wonder-woman had cracked Selva. David stretched, feeling his vertebrae crackle. His muscles ached, and the clock on his desk shocked him. Hours had passed. I was hiding, David thought. "Show me," he told Flander.

"You bet, man. Shy-Shy got it down cold. Because I guessed part of it." Flander was still grinning, pleased with himself, full of pride for this prize he had brought to David. "Just watch," he said.

David blinked as the lights dimmed. One whole wall of his office shimmered and became a screen. A movie was playing on it, a flickering kaleidoscope of antique cinemascope color. Rows of red velvet seats lined the floor in front of it. Popcorn and crumpled candy wrappers littered the floor and a couple necked passionately in the front seat. David wondered irritably how long it had taken Flander to design these details. His gaze shifted to the screen and he went cold.

Up there on the screen, in gritty two-dimensional passion, Beryl and his eldest sister writhed in a tangle of black silk sheets.

"He records *everything,* man! You ought to *see* what Shy-Shy and I had to wade through." Flander wriggled like a puppy. "But it's there. She hands him some stuff—hardcopy—and after she leaves, he runs it under his scanner. He thinks he's got *some* security, man. He's never run into *Shy-Shy!*" The enormous bed vanished, replaced by white sheets of hardcopy, lined up neatly.

David stared at the scrawled numbers and symbols. Sickness gathered in his belly as he recognized his sister's handwritten notes.

"I saw her face, when she was here. She *hates* you, man. Shy-Shy said that a slick piracy job would cost mucho. If big money wasn't part of it, maybe it was *personal.* That made me think it was an inside job, and your sib seemed like a natural. So Shy-Shy boosted me into her virtuals. Your sister doesn't check for ghosts." His lip curled. "She went to see this guy this evening—while you were doing business stuff. I thought maybe he had something on her, but she looked pretty happy to see him. So we went into his filespace and found the stuff you wanted. She's a real bitch, isn't she?"

Dà Jieh. Eldest Sister—proud, disdainful Dà Jieh. All this time, *her.* She had played him like a puppet, and he had let her, because she was *family.* He had been as blind to reality as their father, but it had been their father who had paid the price. David had thrown his gallery show away for nothing. If Dà Jieh wanted to destroy Chen BioSource, nothing that David could do would save it. Some part of him had guessed. Maybe that was why he had buried himself in business this afternoon. He had been hiding from the truth that Flander's wonderful Shy-Shy would dig up for him.

David clenched his teeth until his jaw ached, struggling with a deep resentment against the stranger who had walked into his father's life and casually pointed out the ugly cracks in the foundation.

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"David?" Flander touched his arm, realtime flesh warm behind those virtual fingers. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, man."

Realtime, fleshtime comfort, and this Shy-Shy didn't even keep him *fed*. "Thanks," David whispered. There was nothing he could do. "Beryl's the key. He trades in information and levers." It didn't matter. "I need to talk to Beryl." It didn't fucking matter. . . . David turned his back on Flander and plunged into his office.

He spent the rest of the night hunting Beryl, chasing him through a virtual maze of social and business connections, hopping from party to party, from shrug to knowing shrug.

I don't know. I haven't seen him around.

Don't know where he lives. No one does, man.

Get real, Chen.

Beryl didn't want to be found. Not by David, at least. In the early morning hours, David gave up. He exited the dregs of the party that he had dropped in on and found Flander in his office. He was sitting on the floor, arms clasped around his drawn-up knees, watching David. David had a vague memory of seeing him in just that position every time he had dropped back into his office.

"You look like shit," Flander said softly. "Go sleep, man."

"Shy-Shy," David said. The word came out as a dry rasp. "Get Shy-Shy for me. She can find Beryl."

"Give it some *rest*, man." Flander sounded anxious. "He'll be around. Don't kill yourself, okay?

"Now!" David clenched his fist. He *had* to find Beryl, had to hunt him down and confront him, because if he *didn't* . . . he'd have to confront Dà Jieh. "Get her," he said.

Shy-Shy didn't look as if Flander had waked her. She looked fresh, solidly unruffled, as if she'd been up for hours, or all night, or maybe she just didn't need to sleep at all, David thought sourly. Again, that twinge of familiarity—stronger, this time. He could almost remember. "Beryl," he said, struggling with the fog that kept filling up his head. "The guy my sister . . . met. He's hiding from me. I need his address."

"His security must have picked up a trace from my ghosting. Maybe he guessed it was you." She nodded. "No problem. I downloaded his address into your office filespace after I got out of there. Sorry. I thought you'd find it." Shy-Shy touched his arm. "You look like shit," she said softly. "Go sleep, man."

Flander's exact words of a minute ago, spoken with Flander's phrasing and syntax and inflection. In spite of his exhaustion—or perhaps because of it—David heard it. Differences in timber and pitch misled, but the mechanics were . . . the same.

Familiar. Shy-Shy was so damn *familiar*. Cold trickled down David's spine, raised gooseflesh on his arms. He looked at her closely, with an

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artist's eye this time, *seeing* her. Change the gender, the hair and eye-color, add thirty years of aging, and she looked . . . like Flander. She could be his mother, or his sister. You could change your self in virtual, but you moved the same, thought the same, talked the same. The cold spread, filling David's belly with ice. *She* was power-dressed, but *Flander* scrounged to live. Flander slept on the street. Where did Shy-Shy sleep?

Now that he knew to look, it was *there*. Shy-Shy *was* Flander and . . . she wasn't.

David shivered, his teeth rattling briefly together. She was a *simulation*, an autonomous virtual persona. She had to *be*, and she *couldn't* be. *No one* could create that kind of autonomous body language. She was right here, in the same office with Flander, but her every twitch was independent and *perfect*. *No one* had that kind of talent.

Flander's fingerprints were all over her. David knew his style well enough by now to recognize them.

Even knowing, she still seemed *real*.

David didn't have the kind of talent that it would take to do something like that. He would *never* have it. Numbness was seeping out to the ends of his fingers, up into his brain. "Shy-Shy's a sim," David croaked. "My God, you *made* her."

"No way, man." Flander's body jerked, but he laughed. "Shy-Shy, listen to him!"

David feinted suddenly at Shy-Shy's face, watched her involuntary jerk of reaction, watched her eyes widen, her pupils contract. *Perfect*. You couldn't tell. It made Renmeyer's expensive sim look like an automaton.

I thought *I* was good. David stared at Shy-Shy's face, watching her get angry, seeing Flander's body language in the tightening of her lips, the tension in her shoulders and the curve of her spine. That knowledge that he had talent, *major* talent, had been a talisman for David to keep forever.

Flander had just taken that away.

Showing off. Flander was *showing off*, like he had showed off with his clump of ferns. The kid had been sitting here, watching him *bleed*, laughing up his sleeve because dumb David couldn't even tell a sim from a realtime virtual. "You little shit," David breathed. "You goddamn *punk*." His fist caught Flander on the cheekbone—realtime flesh bruising realtime flesh.

Flander tumbled backward with a cry, sprawling at David's feet.

"Knock it off!" Shy-Shy dropped to her knees beside Flander, angry face turned up to David. "What the hell's the matter with *you?*"

"The game's over." Fists clenched, breathing hard, David stood over Flander. "You *made* her. *Look* at her! You can see the touches. The way you color skin. The way you detail every hair and every wrinkle. She's controlling her own movement—but that's *your* body language. I could run a side-by-side; it's the same, down to the last twitch. Did you think that I was *completely* stupid?" he said bitterly. "Yeah, I thought she was

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real. Did you get a kick out of watching me make a fool out of myself? You little street punk! You think you're so damn clever!"

"I didn't do it." Flander scrambled to his feet, eyes wild, shaking so hard that he could barely stand up. "She's *real*. She takes *care* of me. Always." On her knees on the floor, Shy-Shy clasped her hands, her eyes as wild as Flander's. "She's real!" Flander screamed. "You hear me? She's *real!*"

The image of Shy-Shy popped like a soap-bubble. Flander gave a hoarse, animal cry, and vanished from the office.

"Flander?" David yelled. Silence. It seeped into David's flesh as the seconds ticked by, chilling his anger, turning it into a cold sickness. "Flander?" he called again. "Come *back* here!" He exited the office, premonition prickling his skin like gooseflesh. The lab was empty. So was the living room. The exterior door stood open.

I wouldn't have made it without her, Flander had said of Shy-Shy. There had been love in his eyes when he had looked at her, and she had loved him back. She had been dressed in street-power clothes. What kid would clothe a hero in rags? David looked down the wide empty hallway toward the lift. Was it even possible? he asked himself. Could you create a virtual persona that complex and complete, and then *forget* that you had done so? The answer scared him. You would have to be insane. Seriously insane.

Perhaps. Or perhaps you had to be so lonely that such a creation made you *sane*. If you were talented enough, you could invest that persona with all the love and comfort and safety that didn't really exist anywhere in your fleshtime world. In a way, you could bring that creation to life. Until someone made you see what you had done, anyway.

Reality and unreality. Where did one end and the other begin? I *killed* Shy-Shy, David thought, and sudden grief twisted him. He looked down at his hands. They were clean. Not one trace of Shy-Shy's blood soiled them. He wiped his palms on his tunic and went back into his empty rooms to keep his promise to his father.

The address that Shy-Shy—that Flander—had left on file led David to a decrepit brick building. It stood on the edge of the burned-over scar that had once been the L.A. Barrio, and it looked as if it had been consistently neglected for a century at least. Old earthquake damage had flaked away the concrete façade, and black cracks zig-zagged through the weathered bricks. There was no lock on the entryway. Inside, it smelled like piss. David breathed shallowly. The *Out of Order* placard taped to the lift doors looked about as old as the building. David climbed the stairs. Dust sifted up from the mud-colored carpet and hung in the air in his wake, glittering like gold in the shafts of sunlight that made it through the grimy, steel-netted windows on the landing.

Beryl lived on the third floor. David stood outside on the landing for a few minutes, catching his breath, waiting for his heart-rate to return to normal. *No major security,* the file notes had told him. *He's safe, 'cause*

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no one knows where he lives. Shy-Shy's words. Flander's voice. David bent to examine the locks. They were mechanical. As old as the building. Good cover, David thought coldly. What thief would bother? He slid the thin blade of the smart-key into the first lock. One by one, the locks clicked. David turned the handle, pushed, and walked in.

The squalor inside stopped him on the threshold. The cramped room smelled worse than the hallway; a mix of dirt, unwashed human flesh, and spoiled food. Crusted dishes and clothes lay scattered everywhere. A rumpled bed, a table, and a chair took up much of the floor space. Dust filmed the tabletop, tracked with indecipherable smears. Beryl sat on the edge of his bed, stark naked, his eyes wide and glazed.

Like David, he was netted. Light glittered on the silver threads in his skin. David felt a dull sense of shock. The Beryl he knew was all feline grace, beauty, and sneering self-confidence. The virtual Beryl. The *flesh-time* Beryl was short, with soft, flaccid muscles, a layer of fat around his waist, and drooping shoulders. His skin looked translucent in the glare from the overhead lights, sickly pale, like some cave-dwelling insect.

Beryl shivered as he exited his virtual, and his face tightened into an expression of surprise and fear. "What the *hell* are you doing here? Get out," he said in Beryl's silky voice.

David looked at the dirty cotton sheets on the narrow bed, remembering black silk and his sister's smooth shoulders. "It was a *virtual,*" he said. "Flander was right. This wasn't blackmail." *Why?* David shook his head slightly. To get *him?* Had she been willing to risk the company just to make David look like an incompetent? It wouldn't make any difference, he thought bitterly. Their father wouldn't stop believing in his virtual son, no matter what Dà Jieh did. He took a step closer to Beryl, another.

"Hey, man." Beryl backed up fast, grunted as the table-edge stopped him. "No need for violence, okay?" he stuttered. "Look, let's do this in comfort. How about in your office?"

"I think I prefer fleshtime." David took another step, hands at his sides. Perspiration gleamed on Beryl's face, and David could smell the rank, sour odor of his fear. He is afraid of *me,* David thought. Not because I might hurt him, but just because I'm *here.* "So, tell me," he leaned closer, breathing in Beryl's face. "Tell me all about it."

"Sure, man. What's to tell?" Beryl was bending backward, away from David, hands braced on the tabletop. "It was just a little business deal. A sweet set-up, if you want to know. Your sister is a sharp lady. An operator." He flinched, although David hadn't moved a muscle. "She fed me the stuff," he said breathlessly. "All I did was pass it on to Selva—I know someone there—and settle the details with them. Look, *she* designed the scam. I was just the runner. That's the *truth,* man."

Yes, it probably was the truth. More or less. "You're going to call Selva off," David said softly. "They're going to drop the suit."

"No way." Beryl's voice went up half an octave. "They're going to make

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bucks taking a bite out of Chen BioSource. They're not going to walk away from that."

"I know where you *live*." David didn't smile. Beryl shuddered. "I have copies of the pirated data, so their bite isn't such a sure thing anymore. I'll kick in some money, and you come up with the rest of the price. You'll find something to trade. You have one hour," he said. "Then your address goes public."

"All right." Beryl's arms were trembling. "All *right*, you bastard."

David sat down gingerly on the edge of the upholstered chair. Something more or less yellow had spilled on the arm and dried. It looked like vomit. David looked away, watched Beryl as he went into virtual.

Now he could see the Beryl he knew. The man's body language changed. The muscles in his face firmed. On the other side of an invisible, electronic wall, he tossed his beautiful head, sneered, slunk like a grinning leopard through someone's day. His body mimicked those movements. Which is *real?* David wondered suddenly. *This* Beryl, or the *other* one? David felt dizzy. The smell in the room oppressed him, and a dry finger of nausea moved in his belly.

"It's done." Beryl finally exited. Arms crossed, back against the wall, he glared at David "Check your mail. Selva is withdrawing their suit. Now get out."

David checked. The withdrawal was there, filed and legal. He got to his feet, looked into Beryl's flaccid, twitching face, and left. Outside, the dingy city streets felt like paradise. The nausea still sat coiled in David's gut. Beryl would have to move. His invisibility had been compromised. David imagined him walking through the crowded streets, trapped in realtime as he relocated.

Beryl would get his punishment.

David hailed a cab and gave it the lab address.

His sister was waiting for him. Beryl had called her, of course. She greeted David serenely, and ushered him into her private apartment, up on the second floor of the building that housed her lab. The spotless, almost spartan decor jarred with David's memory of Beryl's squalid clutter. He looked at his sister's profile, smooth and perfect as porcelain, wondering what needs had brought her into Beryl's virtual bed. Sex only? Or something more?

"I didn't expect you to discover my little plot." She set a tray down on a low lacquer table. "I expected you to be misled by the pirate rumors we planted. Tea?" She handed David a delicate cup.

The glaze was a depthless, gleaming black. A tiny, illusory pearl seemed to glimmer in the bottom. "You did this just to make me look bad," he said. "You came within a hair of destroying Chen BioSource." Of destroying Father. "I haven't told Fuchin," he said. "Yet."

"Don't try to lever me with our father. I am weary to death of him *and* of you." Her eyes gleamed, hard and depthless as the glaze on the cup in her hands. "You don't care about Chen BioSource. It's a burden to you,

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a distraction from your so-called art, Little Brother." Her lips twitched. "I *am* Chen BioSource. *I* design the templates we sell. I care about the company more that our father ever did. But I am merely a daughter. So Fuchin had to find a brood mare and make himself a son. I have spent my life making Chen BioSource work, and he is going to give it to *you*. Because you are his *son*." Her voice trembled. "Tanaka wants a new krill I'm developing. They value me for what I *am*. They have offered me a position as head of their aquaculture design unit and I am going to take them up on it. Fuchin will still have a company to give you, but it won't be worth much without me. Tell him whatever you wish, Little Brother. I don't care."

Dà Jieh. Eldest Sister. David looked down at the cup in his hands, remembering her eyes as their father boasted of his *son's* achievements to that forgotten visitor. The illusory pearl gleamed in the bottom of his cup. His sister and their father shared the same passion, the same virtual: Chen BioSource: Immortality. Dynasty. Life. But Father could only visualize it through a *son*.

David set his cup down very carefully. "I *am* self-centered," he said to his sister. "I didn't understand. I am sorry."

He left her sitting there, the black cup in her hands, wary surprise on her face.

David's apartment rang with quiet. He prowled the empty room, peered into the lab. He peeled his tunic off over his head, threw it into the corner, and entered his studio. One by one, he pulled out the racked canvases. No sign of new fox-prints. David pulled out the volcano piece, stretched it out. Flander was woven into every nuance of the piece. David saw his signature in the delicate shadows cast by grassblades, in the gleam of light on a bit of smooth stone. Stars cascaded into the caldera, dying in shimmering light.

The piece was a masterwork.

Because of *Flander*—crazy, talented kid, gone now, maybe forever. What would happen to him, without Shy-Shy? Maybe he could recreate her, somehow convince himself again that she was real. Maybe he couldn't.

"Erase," David cried in a shaking voice. "Delete all storage." The dying stars trembled.

Are you sure you want to do this? his Studio program queried.

David opened his mouth, closed it. This is what my sister did, he thought, and felt dizzy. Jealous, hurt, and angry, she had tried to smash what she loved. David touched a fern-frond, noting the tiny cinnamon spots of the spore-cases on its underside. I was going to destroy this, he thought, because I am hurt and because I am . . . jealous.

Jealous. He would *never* be as good as Flander. Sooner or later, the world would know it.

"Cancel the erase," David said. He squeezed the scene back down to a canvas, racked it carefully.

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"New canvas," he said and picked the white rectangle out of the air. It stretched in his hands, blindingly empty. "Azure," David said and wiped sky across the expanse of nothingness. He muted it to twilight blue, shaded darkness over it; nightfall seeping into the weary end of day.

David worked on into the night in a frenzy of creation. He sculpted Shy-Shy's image, remembering the weathered angles of her face, the love and warmth that Flander had put into her eyes. He added the furtive, driven traces of a fox, melded it all into a symphony of love and hope and compromised dreams, of darkness and light. He put his father into it, too, gave him blind, all-seeing, virtual eyes and a grieving face. Reality and unreality twisted together, became a skein of human hopes and fears and desires.

Sometime well into the next day, David passed out. As he fell, limbs drifting toward the floor in slow motion, the entire piece unrolled inside his head. It was good. David felt one piercing moment of triumph, and then the floor touched his face and darkness swallowed him whole.

They all came by to see Father on the day that he was released from the hospital. They brought gifts, delicacies of fresh fruit or wild-harvest seafood, and he basked in their attentions. He looked better than he had in months. This was Family, operating as it should. Chen BioSource in the flesh. The virtual was intact. David stayed at the periphery, aware that Shau Jieh was keeping an eye on him. His eldest sister nodded to him, and her porcelain face betrayed not one echo of their interview. If she was worried that David would betray her part in the lawsuit, it didn't show. Her bit of espionage had been the smashing fist of an enraged child. Her withdrawal to Tanaka was the calculated destruction of an adult. In either case, Chen BioSource would die.

Die was the appropriate word. Fuchin *was* Chen BioSource. David had understood that in the hospital, when he had made his promise to his father. David sighed. You could kill in virtual. In the illegal parlors, you could kill the body with drugs and unreal weapons. You could kill the soul. David tried to banish the image of Flander's face as Shy-Shy vanished from his life. We surround ourselves with unreality, he thought. Not just the Beryls, who had retreated from the physical world, but people like his father, who had surrounded themselves with an illusory reality shaped to fit their needs.

His middle sister had finally herded her boys out of the room. Only Shau Jieh remained. David went over to the bedside. He knelt down, took his father's hand in his. "I'm glad you feel better," he said in perfect, careful Mandarin.

"You did what I asked. You got Selva to drop the suit. I am proud of you, Er-dz."

David looked away from the approval in his father's eyes. A part of him would always long for that approval. A part of him had been willing to give up everything for it. David took a deep breath. "Selva decided

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that the suit didn't justify the expense. Fuchin, I am leaving Chen BioSource. I can't work for you any more."

"What are you saying to me?" His father struggled higher on the pillows, his cheeks quivering. "You talk nonsense. What will you do? Walk away from your family? Turn your back on us?"

"I don't want to walk away from you," David said gently. "I am still your son, I am still David Chen, but I can't manage the company. I don't want to do it."

"*Wanting* has nothing to do with it. You have a responsibility. To me. To the family."

"I do." David stood. "I know that there are people who will do a better job than I can. I *am* thinking of the family."

"You think only of yourself." His father's tone dripped bitterness. "Like your mother did."

Father had never spoken of his mother to David before. There was hurt in his voice. David held out his arm, watched light run across the silver threads embedded in his skin. Had she been implanting a hope, or an echo of her own failed dreams? I'll ask her, he thought. I *need* to ask her. "*Dwèi bu chi,* I'm sorry, Fuchin." David reached out, touched his father's shoulders gently. "What I do is for the best. I hope you understand that, someday."

His father turned his face to the wall, his expression closed, hard as stone.

"Fuchin?"

His father gave no sign that he had heard. David looked down at his hands. They were trembling. He closed them into fists and turned away. Dà Jieh was still in the atrium. She was sitting on the bench beside the holoed pool, staring at the gold and white fish.

"Reality and unreality are not so easy to tell apart." David stopped beside her. "Sometimes, the unreal has as much power as the real. Maybe more."

"Are you trying to be a philosopher now? I thought you were an *artist?*" Her tone was acid.

"I transferred my company shares into your account." David watched the graceful flick and swirl of the kois' trailing fins. "That gives you a strong majority."

"What are you saying?"

Her expression was wary, as if she expected a trap. In a way, it *was* a trap. David sighed. "I can't stop you from going to work for Tanaka. I can't stop you from destroying Chen BioSource. If you stay, Fuchin will have to listen to you. I don't think he'll like it, but I've quit. That might change his attitude a little."

"You're going to walk away? Just hand over all your shares, with no strings attached?"

"Check your account. It's done. I can't change it now." Those shares were the chains that would bind her forever. She cared about Chen BioSource as much as their father did. David dropped a pebble into the

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water, watched rings form and expand, chasing each other across the still surface. Flander was right. He was too stuck on reality. David lifted his head, met his sister's black, porcelain eyes. "I wish that I had as much talent as you do," he said softly.

Something flickered in those depthless eyes and she bent her head. "If what you tell me is true," she said. "I will probably reject Tanaka's offer."

"I hope so." David walked away.

Shau Jieh was waiting for him beside the lift. She said nothing, but her eyes were sad.

"Our *sister* is the son that Fuchin wants," David said to her. "Gender has nothing to do with it. Do you think he can ever understand that?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Me, too." He had destroyed the David Chen that his father had believed in. He had done it to keep Chen BioSource alive, destroying the smaller illusion to preserve the greater one. There was no way to heal the hurt that he had left behind in his father's bedroom. Part of David would always grieve for that lost father. David lifted his sister's hand gently from his arm, kissed her, and stepped into the lift.

"Your piece, *Synthesis,* is remarkable. Your use of the volcano theme is masterful." Hans Renmeyer paced across David's Studio, hands clasped behind his expensively clad back. "I take it that you have settled whatever was . . . troubling you? Never mind, never mind." He spread his hands, smiling. "Your access-point rating is still high after seven days on the Net. I haven't seen anyone get such a lengthy showing for months now." He coughed delicately. "Perhaps another gallery will be interested. I have heard some . . . rumors."

"Good." David reached out to stroke the black and white cat. I am afraid, he thought. After the payoffs to find Beryl, the bribes for Selva, and his stock transfer, he didn't have much money left. He had never done this for the money, as a means to stay off the street. "If you present me with an offer, I'll accept it," he said. "I give you my word."

"Good, very good. Tell me—" Renmeyer paused, his hand on the studio's virtual door. "Why did you choose the name *Synthesis?* I'm just curious."

The piece had named itself. It *was* a synthesis, a merging of himself and Flander, or reality and unreality. "Because of fox prints," David said to Renmeyer's uncomprehending face, and ushered him out of the studio.

Alone, he took the canvas of Shy-Shy and his father out of the rack, stretched it open. He hadn't worked on it since his night of frenzy. David ran though it slowly. It *was* good. Not perfect, but good. "*Grief,*" David said. "That's what I'll call this one." It was a hymn of grieving for what was, and for what couldn't be. And for what might have been.

A flash of red moved at the edge of vision. David turned slowly, heart leaping. The red fox sat on its haunches in a sweep of stars. *Vulpes fulva*—and you could see every hair ripple in the wind. It cocked its head, green eyes wary, ears pricked.

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"You're very good," David said. "You're going to be better than me."

The fox flattened its ears, curled its lips back in a snarl.

"*Together*," David said softly, "We can be great."

For a long moment, the fox didn't move, and David found himself holding his breath. Then it opened its jaws, lolled its red tongue over its pointed white teeth, and trotted into the center of the scene. It flicked its tail and scattered shards of light across the piece.

David opened his arms and Flander walked into them; grubby, skinny street kid whose ragged clothes covered state-of-the-art skinthins. He needed a shower. David watched the glittering droplets of light settle over his father's face and Shy-Shy's, like shed tears, like forgiveness.

It was the perfect touch.●

綜合

SUNFLOWER

Slowly beginning to spin, gently
so gently you blossom
unfurling in utter stillness
extending your petals
delicate beyond delicate
thin as a molecule, dreamfilm
blooming in moonflare
kilometer by kilometer opening
to capture thin gusts
of radiant wind, bursts
of pulse-laser photons
that cast you from Earth harbor
like a bright flower
caught in slow current
frailest of ships
on the fathomless sea.

—David Lunde

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Pos-Def Fun

Orbital Resonance
By John Barnes
Tor, $19.95

There's a curious little subgenre of SF that's still extant—and by little, I mean little; only a few examples come to mind. Nevertheless, it has a distinct identity, and it's all Robert Heinlein's fault. That category of which I speak is the first person narrative of a precocious adolescent female living in a distinctly exotic milieu (exotic as in different) who through her precociousness gets involved in some sort of difficulty which makes up the plot of the book.

These stories would automatically be classified as YA (Young Adult) were not the precedent set by Robert Heinlein, particularly with his *Podkayne of Mars* and the shorter "Menace from Earth." Alexei Panshin carried on the tradition with *Rite of Passage* and there have been sundry examples ever since.

The latest is *Orbital Resonance* by John Barnes (why don't women ever write these things?) and it's a right honorable addition to the club. The milieu is a "domesticated asteroid" in the process of conversion to being a REALLY big cargo ship; its name is *The Flying Dutchman*. The century is the next; Earth is barely recovering from a *fin de siècle* period of anarchy brought on by a plague of mammoth proportion of a mutant strain of AIDS, and a European war of unspecified cause and dimension, though enough reference is made backward to intrigue.

Our precocious heroine is one thirteen-year-old Melpomene Murray. Her book is a project destined to explain the rapidly mutating society of space dwellers (there are other ships in the works as well as a Martian terraforming enterprise) that starts out as a school (we use the word loosely—almost all of Melpomene's regulated life is "school" by our standards) project.

As with the best of these, the novel is a neat mix. There's personality observation: Melpomene and her peers are subject to as much adolescent *angst* as any (it's surely no coincidence that part of the family's precious weight allowance was devoted to a real copy of the book that begins "If you really want to hear about it . . . "—Salinger, of course), and there's family conflict that rings true since Mel's mother can't forsake nostalgia for the old days and drives Mel and her brother pos-def weirdwired. (There's some nice invented slang, but not so much as to make the novel unreadable.)

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This is neatly meshed with seemingly inexhaustible details about life on the "ship," from "Earth Horror Hour," where the students are required to watch the ongoing awfuls of life on Earth, to very well thought out sports such as Aerocrosse and toggle racing (very exciting, both). There's even some Heinleinian philosophy (minimal, thank God) as to the place of unions on the "ship." And the plot (literally and figuratively) is provided by Mel and her boyfriend's discovery that their generation is being mind manipulated —benevolently?

Orbital Resonance took me back in the best kind of way—it is posdef the kind of book I wasn't sure they wrote any more.

An Original

The Pixillated Peeress

By L. Sprague de Camp & Catherine Crook de Camp
Del Rey, $17.00

Early into *The Pixillated Peeress* by L. Sprague de Camp and Catherine Crook de Camp, the hero, one Thorolf Zigramson, whose background is that of a university scholar forced by circumstance into becoming an Acting Sergeant of the Fourth Commonwealth Foot of the Rhaetian Army, finds himself eavesdropping on the Executive Committee of the local Magical Guild.

Whereupon I had a sudden attack of *déjà vu*—somewhere in the far past there was an Enchaunter's (sic) Council . . . I connect it with the Harold Shea stories by de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, which I first read a little over forty years ago, and the first of which was published (in magazine form) in 1940. The Harold Shea stories (which have been published in various combinations as *The Incompleat Enchanter, The Compleat Enchanter,* and *The Complete Compleat Enchanter,* the ramifications of which would defy this small space to explain), which were written with Pratt, and the current novel, written with de Camp's wife, cover a spread of fifty-one years, and share the same grace, wit, and invention.

De Camp was one of that amazing stable of thoroughbred writers that John W. Campbell, Jr., brought together just before World War II to revolutionize SF. With the magazine *Unknown,* he also revolutionized fantasy, but for curious reasons fantasy as a genre did not catch on until the 1960s and Tolkien. De Camp is perhaps not quite so well recognized as some of the Campbell discoveries, probably because his forte has always been toward the lightsome. An equally adept author of SF and fantasy, he (with Pratt) virtually invented the *light* fantasy, complete (compleat) with bumbling magician, and the adept and hilarious use of anachronism—a subgenre in which we are now awash.

So don't expect anything heavyweight from *The Pixilated Peeress.* It takes place in a magic world that is becoming all too mundane: describing the current perils of knighthood, our hero tells us that "if he slew a dragon, he'd be arrested by the game warden for hunting out of season . . . if he snatched a maiden from an enchanter vile, the mage would hale him to law on charges of abduction.

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If he even sang a roundelay beneath his true love's casement window, the song's composer would demand a royalty."

Come to think of it, perhaps even the stalwartly medieval de Camp may be succumbing to the cynicism of our age. Nevertheless, you may be sure the language rings true (find out the meaning of "futtering" or you'll miss a bit of ribaldry), and that Thorolf's adventures with dragons, trolls, and the arch-magus Orlandus (whose organization of cultish Sophonomists has a curiously contemporary ring) in pursuing his lady-love Countess (who gets turned into a squid at one point—the inept magician is alive and well) are as much fun as you'll have with any of de Camp's younger imitators, or more.

Short, Sweet

Halo

By Tom Maddox
Tor, $18.95

Tom Maddox has achieved a certain reputation for his short stories. His first novel, *Halo,* is problematic because it seems more like a long short story that a short novel (which it is). This is not necessarily meant as a negative criticism—the story stands on its own, and is more than well written and conceptually intriguing.

Essentially it pits two sets of characters against each other, less in conflict than in perception. The setting is a next-century (?) Earth, pretty much a mess environmentally but with a certain amount of social sanity working to get it together. There are two inhabited orbiting space "environments": the older Athena station, now aging and in a state of disrepair, and the newer "Halo," a paradise compared to Earth and Athena.

Halo is controlled by Aleph, a large-scale m-i ("machine intelligence") built by Sen Trax Corp., which has a data monopoly on Halo. Science has long ago given up trying to create artificial intelligences, contenting itself with m-i's instead.

The characters involved are Gonzales, a sort of trouble-shooter for Sen Trax; Diana Heywood, a scientist involved in creating the m-i Aleph; Jerry Chapman, also involved with Aleph in the early stages as well as with Diana; and Lizzie Jordan (are the unfortunate rhyming connotations of that name intended, one wonders?), head of the "Interface Collection," a group of aberrant humans "collected" by Aleph, which nominally runs Halo. Chapman has been rendered terminally ill by poisoned seafood; his interface with Aleph is considered extremely important, and Diana (who was dismissed from the project years ago) and Gonzales have been brought to Halo to assist Aleph in keeping Jerry alive.

Then there are the m-i's, who are evolving into individual intelligences without the knowledge of humanity: Aleph itself, of course; Gonzalez' memex, a sophisticated m-i which has developed a personality rather waywardly calling itself HeyMex; and the flamboyant Mr. Jones, an m-i "advisor" that can be afforded only by the very rich and belongs to Gonzales' boss.

The interplay among these human and machine personalities as they attempt to save Jerry, played

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out against the fascinating environment of Halo and the artificial world created by Aleph for Jerry, make up the novel, and for the most part, it succeeds beautifully. I would take exception to one section which seems a throwback to the hallucinogenic sixties, and to return to my original nit to be picked, the novel seems almost too short for the wealth of material Maddox has created for it.

A TTTT

Great Work of Time

By John Crowley.
Bantam, $3.99 (paper)

John Crowley's *Great Work of Time* is in essence a reprint, and yet many of you, like myself, might have missed it the first time around since it was published in a collection of short works unfortunately titled *Novelties*. (And it went on to win the 1990 World Fantasy Award for novella length.) The publisher's decision to print it by itself could raise some eyebrows, since it makes for a very slim volume indeed, but I can't fault their doing so, since I bypassed the story in its earlier incarnation and I'm sure many others did, too. And it well deserves its distinction.

Short it may be; simple it is not. The author opens by telling us "... it begins, not in one time or place, but everywhere at once—or perhaps *everywhen* is the better word." It is, as you might guess, a time travel story, and a tale of alternate worlds brought about by that time travel. And when one finishes its circular route, one indeed sees that there are a number of places one could have entered and exited the story.

But what's it *about?*, the impatient reader cries. Well, er, as anyone who has read Crowley before knows, it's a little hard to say what any of his stories are *about*, per se. And this one, turning back on itself as it does, is particularly hard to anatomize, particularly as with all good TTTTs (Tricky Time Travel Tales), there are surprises one does *not* want to give away (see Heinlein's "By His Bootstraps"). But it does have to do with a nerd named Caspar Last who is the only person in past, present, or future to invent time travel, and who transcends the usual fallible means of capitalizing on this (such as predicting sporting events) in a particularly clever way. And it has to do with the murder of a young Cecil Rhodes who would then have left his considerable fortune to founding a society for preserving the British Empire. And it has to do with that society, the Otherhood, getting Caspar's secret and using it to create an ongoing Pax Britannica.

But there's also a future with three intelligent species—*Hominidae* (with three subspecies), *Draconiidae* (with four), and *Sylphydae* (or angels). Not to mention orthogons, which have to do with the fact that time keeps going at right angles instead of "straight" ahead. The orthogons begin to turn in the prop wash of the whole system's progress at one second per second out of what-was and into the what-has-never-yet-been ... (there's not much of that, thank goodness). I'll raise one *caveat*—those who don't know their British Imperial history, or think

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Cecil Rhodes just another greedy colonial imperialist, may find themselves a little at sea. (My heart's always been with Haggard, secretly). Otherwise, this is indeed a Great Work of Time and deserves publication on its own.

Thin Mist

The White Mists of Power
By Kristine Kathryn Rusch
ROC, $3.99 (paper)

I had read almost exactly a third of Kristine Kathryn Rusch's *The White Mists of Power* when I had occasion to describe to a friend what had happened thus far.

"Well, the heir to the throne —who is barely more than a child —has been deliberately cast adrift in the stews of the city of Anda, à la *The Prince and the Pauper*, and is going to have a veritable Oliver Twist of a time of it, obviously.

"In the meantime, the dubious bard Byron and the inept magician Seymour (Seymour? Yes, Seymour) have escaped the carnivorous dogs and lands of the wicked Lord Dakin, made it to the city, and have just escaped from the inn where Lord Dakin has arrived to conclude some intrigue with the Lady Jelwra, with whom he has a land dispute.

"And, oh yes, every once in a while a sort of person called an Enos, who seems to be a guardian of the land, appears and makes mysterious pronouncements."

Well, I thought, come to think of it, that's not much for a whole third of a novel, even though I'd not exactly been bored. And it wasn't exactly as if there had been an elaborate magic world being built up here—it's fairly run of the medieval.

Luckily, things pick up for the final two thirds of the novel —there's a lot of intrigue and betrayals and revelations and a murder or two.

But I must in all fairness register a few complaints. First and foremost, unless I missed a most important disclosure (and I'm the first to admit this can happen), it isn't until we're well over halfway through the story that we're told that the two strains of the novel we're following, the lost prince and the escaping magician and bard, are not running concurrently. This changes the entire concept of the story, and not, I'm afraid, to its advantage. One must be very careful about pulling this kind of surprise on the reader—there's as much of a chance of him/her feeling "I've been hoodwinked" as "I've been surprised." Secondly, there's not really that much fantasy in the story. The inept magician pulls off a spell or two, and the Enos pop out of the woodwork occasionally to deus the machina, especially at the end, but I just didn't really believe this was that magic a world.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . The Bradbury Chronicles is a collection of stories "in honor of Ray Bradbury," edited by William F. Nolan and Martin H. Greenberg. Contributors are Orson Scott Card, Richard Matheson, Isaac Asimov, et al., with an afterword by Bradbury himself (ROC, $19.95) . . . Ah, here we have an enigma for this section of this column: a collection of small press work put out by a big press. Does it go under "Small Presses"? Let's say no and list it with the big boys, since

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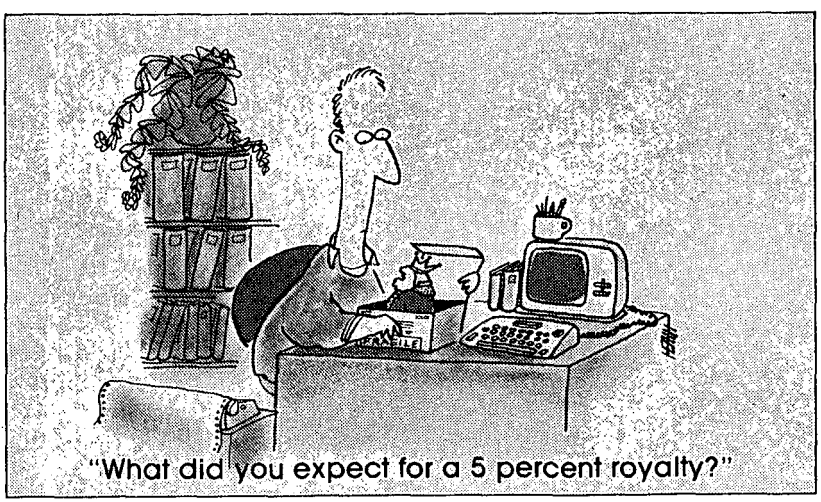
you should be able to get it comparatively easily rather than searching for it. It's *The Best of Pulphouse, The Hardback Magazine,* that enterprising and handsome periodical that's actually kept itself going since 1988. The editor is Kristine Kathryn Rusch (St. Martin's, $22.95).

Sequels, prequels, series, and whatnot . . . R. A. MacAvoy's *King of the Dead* is the second in her inventive "Lens of the World'" trilogy (Morrow, $19.00).

Reprints etc. . . . A neat double bill of reprints by Fritz Leiber, whose SF classic, *The Big Time,* you will remember I rejoiced in two months ago. In these two novels, Leiber proves his mastery of the supernatural genre: *Conjure Wife* is one of the first modern novels to set witchcraft in an absolutely mundane setting, a college campus (that was back in midcentury when campuses were as mundane as they are now); *Our Lady of Darkness* carries on the tradition of the master of them all, M. R. James (Tor, $4.99, paper).

A thought for the month . . . Percy Bysshe Shelley is, of course, one of the giants of English language poetry, an immortal whose works will probably not be forgotten so long as the language is spoken. His wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, is primarily remembered as the author of one novel, a pseudo-Gothic tale that has remained popular for close to two centuries but whose author relatively few wo/men-in-the-street could name. And yet who, in the long run, has exerted the most influence on our culture? Don't expect an answer from this quarter—just brought it up as something to discuss 'round the dinner table—or whatever it is people eat around these days.

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 1393 rue La Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L 1T6, Canada. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The spring con(vention) season is almost at our throats again. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. If calling (early evening's good) say why you're calling right off. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

FEBRUARY 1992

7-9—**Psurreal Con.** For info, write: **Box 2069, Norman OK 73070.** Or. phone: **(405) 235-2761** (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). Con will be held in: Oklahoma City OK (if city omitted, same as address) at the Central Plaza Hotel. Guests will include: Tad Williams, R. Bailey, Bill Hodgson, C. Hamilton.

14-16—**Boskone. (617) 625-2311.** Marriott and Sheraton, Springfield MA. Yolen, J. Lee, Langford.

14-16—**EclectiCon. (408) 225-0569.** Hilton, Sacramento CA. No guests are confirmed at press time.

14-16—**Masque.** Cobden Hotel, Birmingham England. Annual British con for SF/fantasy costuming.

14-16—**ChimeraCon, Kingswood Apts. #H-6, Chapel Hill NC 27514.** At the UNC Student Union.

28-Mar. 1—**ConCave, Box 24, Franklin KY 42134. (502) 586-3366.** At the Park Mammoth Resort, KY.

28-Mar. 1—**Corflu and English Regency Assembly, 15931 Kalisher, Granada Hills CA 91344. (818) 366-3827.** Cockatoo Motel, Hawthorne CA. The annual conventions for fan(-published maga)zine fans, and for fans of Georgette Heyer's Regency romances (with dancing), are being held jointly this year.

MARCH 1992

5-8—**ConTact, 1412 Potomac Ave. SE, Washington DC 20003. (202) 544-4984.** SF/anthropology.

5-8—**World Horror Con, Box 22817, Nashville TN 37202. (615) 226-6172.** Richard Matheson, Morris.

6-8—**WolfCon, Box 796, Wolfville NS B0P 1X0. (902) 542-9306.** SF, fantasy, gaming, multi-media.

6-8—**Czarkon, 5138B Old Lemay Ferry, Imperial MO 63052 (314) 287-3825.** Clayton MO. Over 21 only.

6-8—**ConSonance, Box 29888, Oakland CA 94604. (800) 866-9245 or (510) 763-6415.** SF folksinging.

13-15—**CrackerCon, Box 1509, Orange Park FL 32067.** Holiday Baymeadows, Jacksonville FL. Lackey.

20-22—**LunaCon, Box 338, New York NY 10150.** Hilton. Rye Brook NY. S.R. Delany, Lehr, Singer.

25-29—**ICFA, 500 NW 20th, HU-50, B-9, Florida Atlantic Univ., Boca Raton FL 33431.** Academic con.

26-29—**Magnum Opus Con, Box 6585, Athens GA 30604. (404) 549-1533.** M. Bradley, Bujold, Zelazny.

26-29—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 248-2010.** Usually has many writer guests.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $95 to 3/31/91.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. #1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598.** San Francisco CA. $85 in 1992.

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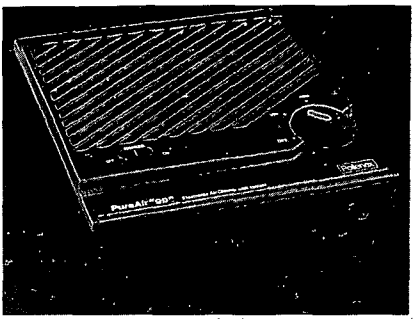

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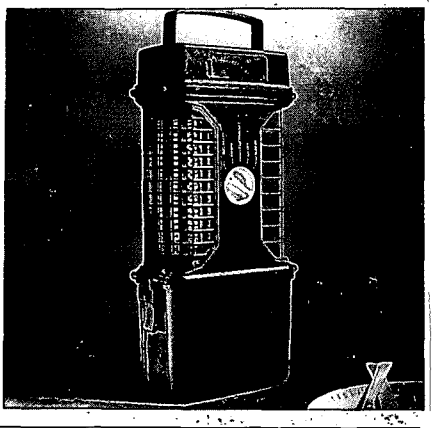

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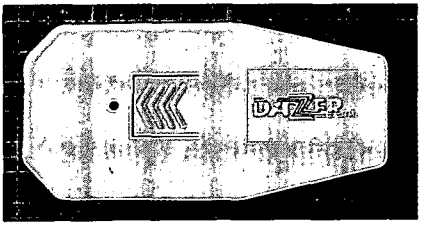

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